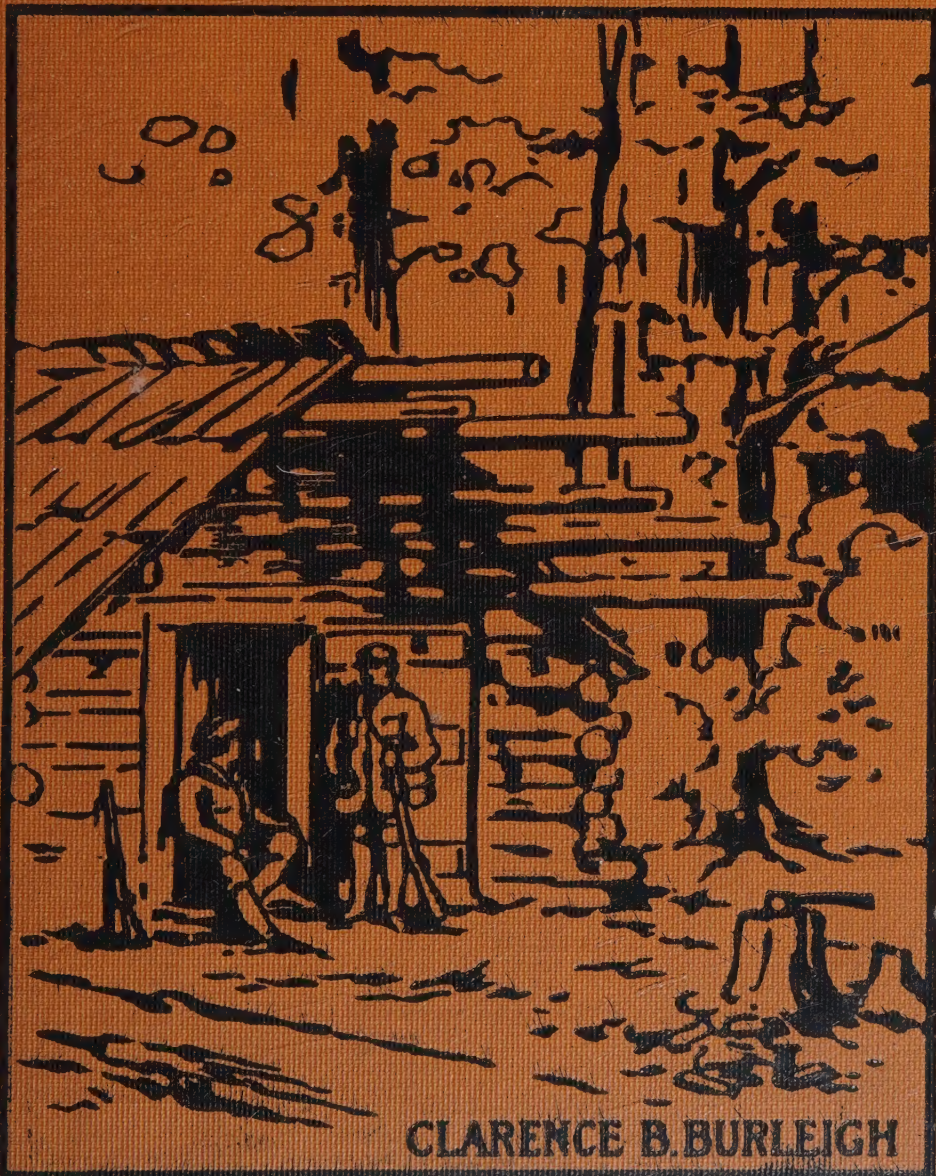
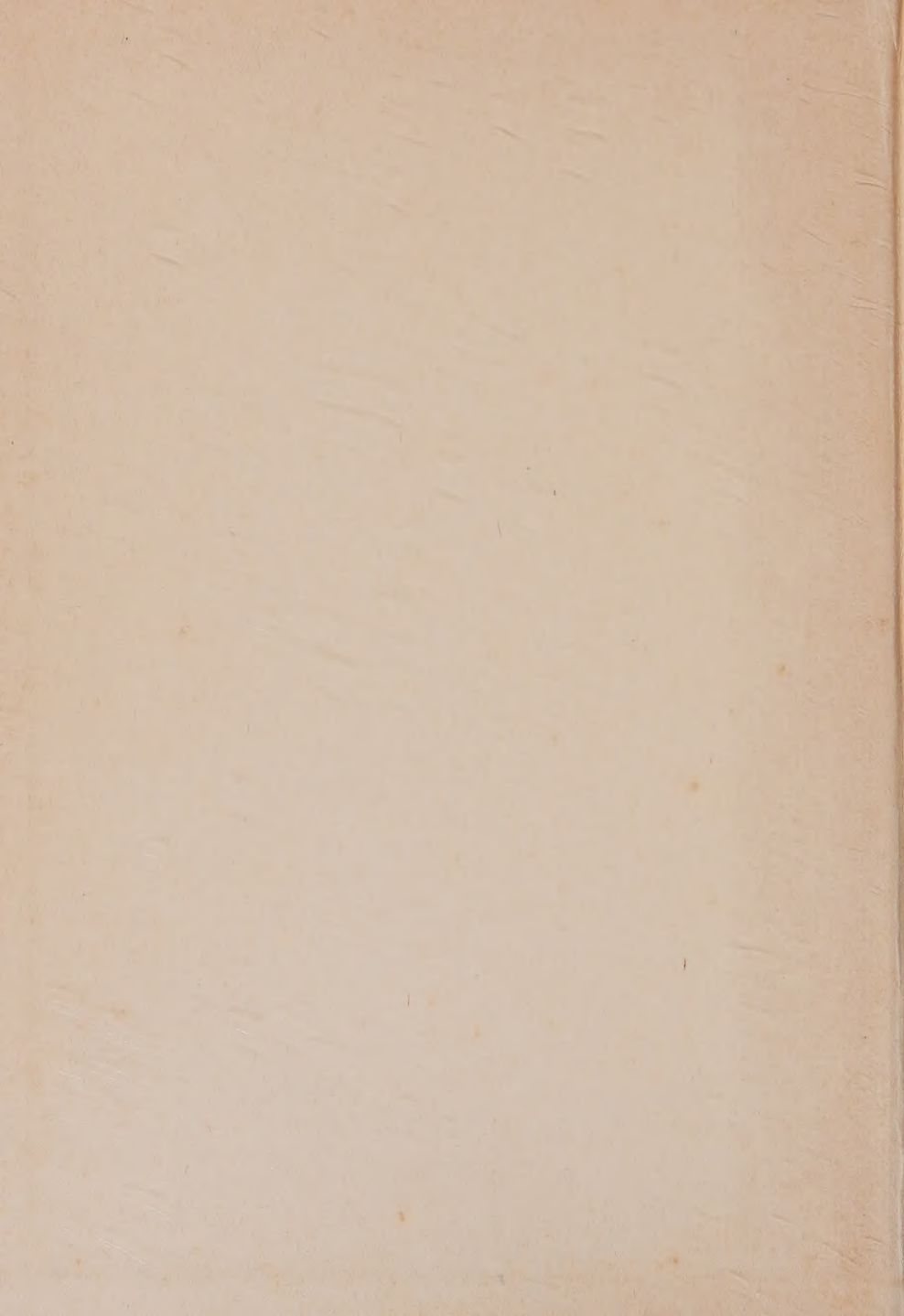


THE CAMP ON LETTER K



CLARENCE B. BURLEIGH



By CLARENCE B. BURLEIGH

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"DO YOU SUPPOSE PETE OR HIS GANG WILL SEE THIS SMOKE?"

Page 285.

Raymond Benson Series

The Camp on Letter K

OR

Two Live Boys in Northern Maine

By

C. B. BURLEIGH

Illustrated by L. J. BRIDGMAN



BOSTON

LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

Published, August, 1906

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THE CAMP ON LETTER K

NORWOOD PRESS
BERWICK AND SMITH CO.
NORWOOD, MASS.
U. S. A.

TO MY BROTHER
LEWIS A. BURLEIGH
THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

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THE CAMP ON LETTER K

CHAPTER I

TROUBLE AT THE CHESTNUT HIGH SCHOOL

"Send 'em right along, Rame!"

"Soak 'im!"

"Ah, ha! See the hole in his bat!"

"Here's another victim!"

These and various similar expressions came from a group of boys engaged in a game of "scrub," in the closely-nibbled sheep pasture behind the weather-beaten schoolhouse at Chestnut Corner.

A tall, wiry-built boy was in the pitcher's box and, from the comments of his companions, was evidently the school favorite in that position. He pitched with little apparent effort, and sent the ball across the plate with a speed that was decidedly disconcerting to the batsman who faced him, and equally amusing to the spectators perched upon the top rails of the bunk fence on either side of the foul-board.

These rails were known as the "grand stand," and the foul-board itself was made of mill slabs placed side by side, perpendicularly, and spiked to a section of the fence.

Some distance back of the home-plate, a stocky boy was catching, on the first bound, balls that eluded the batsman, and returning them to the pitcher.

"Why don't you come up under the bat and pick 'em off, Ned?" shouted a boy somewhat larger than the others, who was evidently the leader of the group.

"Yes, yes," chorused his companions. "Pick 'em off."

"Thanks!" returned the catcher, good-naturedly. "Not to-day, boys. Some other day, when our school mask and chest protector get along."

"They should be here now," said the boy who had first spoken. "I got the bill of them yesterday. A fellow who can catch as well as you can, Ned, when no one is batting, should have no trouble in working close up in a game."

"I don't know, Dave," was the doubtful rejoinder, "I imagine it's something of a trick to get used to the bat. But, anyway, I'll give it a try when our outfit gets here."

"And you'll make a go of it, sure as preaching," responded the older boy, confidently.

"Poppycock!" sniffed a boy at one end of the row. "Perhaps he will, and then again, perhaps he won't. It's all a matter of nerve. If he had the sand, he'd pick 'em off now."

The last speaker, Allen Webster, was easily distinguished from his companions by his more stylish and expensive clothing. He was a New York boy, whose

parents had sent him to the home of his maternal grandfather at the Corner, on account, it was said, of several disgraceful episodes in which he had been concerned at home. He was a pompous and conceited boy, who pronounced the people of the Corner "a gang of Rubes;" and who, feeling that the town was much too small for a person of his importance, never lost an opportunity to enlarge upon the wonders of his native city. It is needless to say that he had not thereby increased his popularity.

His sneering remark was a firebrand among the boys to whom it was addressed.

"Oh!" "Ah!" "Indeed!" "Hear him!" "The Great Mogul has spoken!" came in sarcastic chorus from the boys about him.

"What do you know about it, anyway?" demanded the older boy who acted as spokesman for the group.

"Well, I rather guess, Dave Weston, I've had as good opportunities to know the game as any of you here," swaggered Allen. "I used to go to the Polo grounds at home every day. I've seen every team in the National League play time and time again."

"Behold the great uncrowned king of the mighty Kypootums," proclaimed one of the boys with a wave of his hand.

"No, you're mistaken," interposed another. "He's the nickel-plated chief of the wild Galaboos."

"Let up, boys. Just cut that out, please," interposed Dave, sternly. "We don't care what you've seen,"

he added, turning to the red-faced and angry Allen. "We'd rather know what you've done. Did you ever catch?"

"Catch?" retorted Allen, disdainfully. "Didn't I say that I used to go to the Polo grounds regularly? I've caught some of the greatest pitchers in the country in practice—professionals, too, mind you."

Dave Weston dropped to the ground, and, walking to where Allen sat, held out his hand with mock enthusiasm.

"I'm mighty glad to know you, Mr. Webster," he said blandly. "It is pleasing to all of us to realize that we have such a crack-a-jack in our midst. To be sure, our star performer, Mr. Raymond Benson, is not a professional; neither has Mr. Ned Grover had much experience as a catcher. They both need proper training, and it is very evident that you are just the man to give it. Hi there, Ned!" he called to the stocky little catcher. "Come up on the grand stand. Mr. Webster's going to catch."

"Wh—what do you mean?" stammered Allen, turning uneasily to the grinning group upon the fence.

"Why," explained Dave, "we should like to have you coach Mr. Benson a spell. Go in and catch, old man."

"Three cheers for Coach Webster!" shouted Roscoe Bean, jumping to the ground, and waving his cap in the air.

The cheers were given with a hilarious enthusiasm

that was plainly disconcerting to Allen Webster. He had come down from his perch on the fence, and was looking nervously in the direction of the schoolhouse.

"I—you see fellows—in fact, I'm a little out of practice just now," he said in uncertain tones.

"Never mind that, old man," said Dave. "A fellow who has caught professionals doesn't need any practice to handle amateurs."

"That's so. We'll allow for your lack of practice," chimed in Roscoe Bean.

"You see, fellows—I—really—my hands are a trifle soft now. Some other time when I—"

"Huh!" sneered Dave Weston. "Are you going to crawfish?"

"Are you, who have caught professionals in New York, going to squeal on a Rube pitcher here at Chestnut Corner," added tall and solemn-looking Jim Farris, in tones of withering scorn.

"Of course he's going to catch," declared pudgy, good-natured Elmer Cole. "Who said he wasn't? Go in, old boy, and show 'em a thing or two."

"Yes, come on, Allen," called Raymond Benson from the pitcher's box. "I'll be easy on you," he added, encouragingly.

"Of course it will take me a little while to get my hand in," explained Allen nervously, as he slowly took his place behind the home-plate. "Throw me one or two," he added, when he had donned Ned Grover's big mit.

Raymond threw one or two slow balls across the plate, which, to the surprise of the boys, Allen caught with comparative ease.

"It would be funny, wouldn't it, if that fellow should have the laugh on us after all," said Dave Weston.

"Wait till he tries it under the bat," responded Roscoe Bean, grimly.

"Batter up! Get a hustle there!" shouted diminutive Harry Oakley, who was acting as umpire.

"Let 'er go," responded broad-shouldered Sam Brown, as he took his stand in the batter's position, and pounded his bat defiantly upon the home-plate.

"Don't swing your bat back and forth so, Sam," protested Allen, irritably. "Didn't I tell you I was out of practice?"

"All right," responded the big batter, cheerfully. "Anything to please you, old boy."

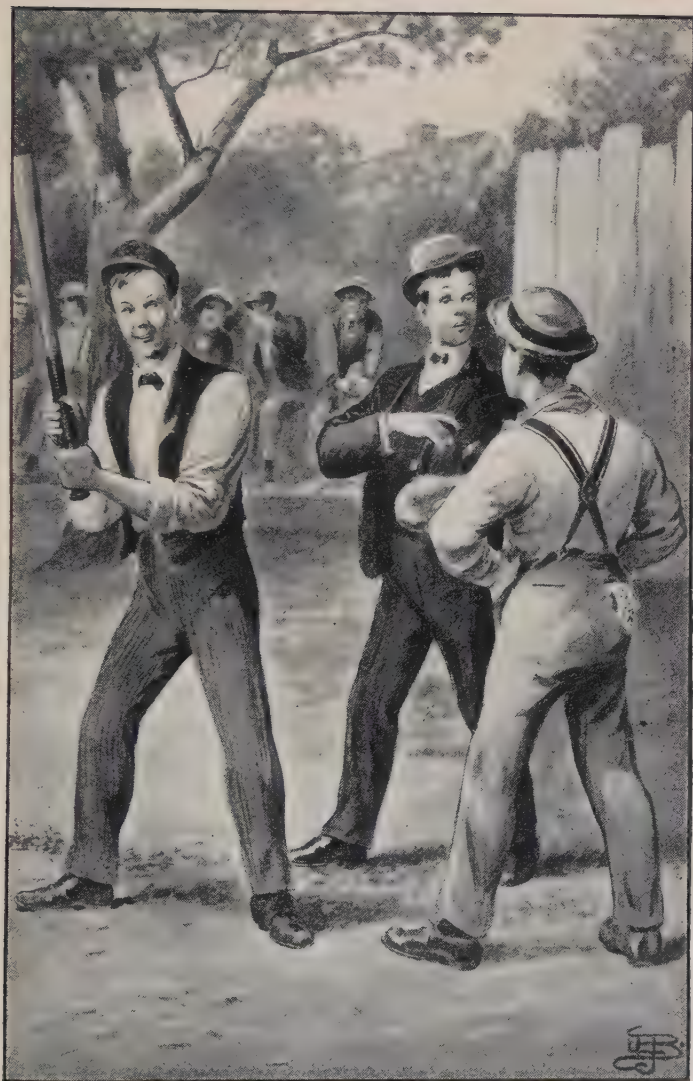
"Play!" shouted the umpire.

A slow ball came across the plate, and Sam made a pretense of hitting at it. It went through, and, to the surprise of the boys, nestled safely in Allen's mit.

"Perhaps he'll make good," said Jim Farris, regretfully.

"It will be the first time if he does," declared Elmer Cole. "Hi there, Ned! Get on to his pose. I see your finish."

"All right," laughed Ned Grover, good-naturedly, "I'm not so much in love with the job that I shouldn't



"YOU SEE HOW IT'S DONE, DON'T YOU?"—Page 7.



be willing to give it up to a better and more experienced man."

One or two other balls came into Allen's hands in the same way, and it was evident that his confidence was beginning to rise.

"Steam 'em along, Rame," he shouted to the pitcher. "That is—not too hard—," he hastily added, as he saw that Raymond was about to follow his directions.

A ball somewhat swifter than the others passed beneath Sam's bat, and again Allen succeeded in holding it.

"Rame and Sam are playing horse with him," declared Dave Weston, confidently.

Allen was evidently elated with his unexpected success. "You see how it's done, don't you?" he said, turning patronizingly to Ned Grover. "Now you go in and try it, and I'll stand by and give you a few points."

"I'd rather watch you a while longer," said Ned, dryly. "I think I'm beginning to catch on a little."

"Push 'em along, old man—that is, just fairly fast," called Allen, returning the ball to Raymond.

This time the ball came across the plate with greater speed than before, and Sam Brown swung at it in earnest. There was a yell of anguish from Allen. A foul tip had hit him in the side of the face, and he fell, writhing and moaning, to the ground.

The frightened boys saw that the blood was trickling down his chin, apparently from his mouth; and, fear-

ing that their fun had occasioned serious consequences, they hastened to bring cold water from the spring near by, and attend to their suffering playmate, who was sobbing and groaning in what appeared to be mortal agony.

"I'm done for—oh, I'm killed—I'm dying, I know I am!" he gasped in terrified accents. "Why don't some one send for the doctor?"

Several badly frightened boys were about to act upon this suggestion, when Dave Weston, who was washing the blood from Allen's face with a wet handkerchief, hastened to stop them.

"Hold on there, you ninnies," he shouted, peremptorily. "There's nothing serious here—no need for any of you to get rattled. It's only a nosebleed."

A moment later Allen rose a little unsteadily to his feet, and turned hotly upon Raymond Benson. "It's all your fault," he shouted, angrily. "You did it on purpose."

"Why, what did I do?" demanded Raymond, in open-eyed amazement.

"You threw me down. You pitched me a high ball when I signaled for a low one."

"I didn't know we were using any signals," protested Raymond.

"Oh, of course not!" sneered Allen. "You don't know much anyway. I give you fair warning though, I'm through with you, and I'll be even with you some day. You'll never get me to catch you again," and,

turning upon his heel, he stalked away into the school-house just as the bell was ringing for the afternoon session.

"I was wondering how Allen would manage to square himself," chuckled Dave Weston, as the boys followed after him. "Blamed if he hasn't skinned around the corner in fairly good shape."

"That fellow can follow a weasel 'most anywhere," responded Roscoe Bean, with conviction, as the door closed behind them.

It was one of those hot days that occasionally come in early autumn, and through the open windows came the rumble of long-bodied potato wagons on their way to market, mingled with the passing pleasantries of their drivers.

Raymond Benson was conscious of feeling hot and uncomfortable as he dropped into his seat. He felt that he was foolish to give any weight to the angry remarks of Allen Webster, and still he could not prevent them from rankling. Somehow he found it extremely difficult that afternoon to concentrate his attention upon his studies, and it was evident that others found themselves in the same plight. A spirit of unrest appeared to pervade the whole school, and Mr. Beecham, the teacher, who was trying his best to counteract it, looked tired and worried.

He had turned his back upon the school, and was stepping upon the platform to ring the bell for recess, when a deafening explosion shook the room. In a

moment all was wild confusion. The pupils sprang to their feet with white, startled faces, and a number of the girls could not forbear a scream,—several of them becoming almost hysterical.

Mr. Beecham turned sharply about, and stood for a moment in dazed bewilderment. The frightened pupils sank back into their seats, and a hush of expectancy fell upon the school.

“Who did that?”

The teacher’s tones were stern and cold. Every pupil in the room had an uncomfortable feeling of being singled out for special inspection.

Mr. Beecham received no reply to his question; but he caught certain covert glances in the direction of Allen Webster, who was apparently applying himself to his history lesson with unwonted diligence.

“Mr. Webster!”

“What, sir?” asked Allen in a voice which, despite his efforts to appear unconcerned, was somewhat husky.

“Do you have any idea what caused that explosion?”

“Why, I thought—that is—it sounded like a big torpedo.”

“I think that’s just what it was,” responded the teacher with conviction. “Do you have any idea who threw it?”

“No, sir.”

A look of contempt flashed from Mr. Beecham’s gray eyes; but, to the surprise and the relief of the school, he did not pursue his inquiries further.

"In view of this episode we will omit the afternoon recess," he said quietly.

Nothing further occurred to mar the serenity of the session; and the pupils, to their credit, endeavored to show their disapproval of the discreditable occurrence by a close attention to their studies, and a general improvement in deportment.

As Allen Webster stepped out into the school yard at the close of the afternoon session, he found Raymond Benson waiting for him.

"You don't expect me to catch for you, Benson?" he said with a scowl. "I thought I told you I'd quit."

"You needn't worry about that," replied Raymond, coolly. "I don't want you to catch. I was just waiting to return a little of your property."

"My property?" repeated Allen, doubtfully.

"Yes, this," returned Raymond, as he dropped into Allen's outstretched palm a small handful of polished gravel stones mixed with little pieces of red paper.

"Why—what's this?" stammered Allen, uneasily.

"Looks to me very much like the remains of a torpedo," laughed Raymond.

"Oh, you're a bird, you are," sneered Allen, wrathfully. "You think you are so mighty smart and—and—foxy. You make me tired."

"And you weary me just a little," responded Raymond.

"Oh, do I? It's quite refreshing to know that something can break the crust of your conceit. You

might as well understand, Benson, that I'm not asking any favors of you. I don't wear your collar."

"I'm very glad to hear it," returned Raymond, with provoking coolness. "I'm sure I never wanted you to wear anything of mine. One thing is very certain—although you do not appear to have grasped the fact—none of the fellows here at the Corner are wearing your collar. As a matter of fact, it is too small for most of them."

With a spiteful movement, Allen attempted to throw the gravel stones into Raymond's face; but his hand was unsteady, and they flew wide of their mark.

"My property, is it?" he cried, angrily. "Looks to me as though 'twas yours."

"No, it's yours," declared Raymond, with emphasis.

"How do you know, smarty?"

"In the first place, I saw you when you tossed it over your shoulder against the back blackboard. In the next place I found the remains of it in my hat, which happened to lie on the platform right under the place where it struck."

"And now I suppose you're waiting to tattle to Beecham?" sneered Allen.

Raymond's face flushed hotly. "I'm not in the habit of being a talebearer," he said, in a constrained voice.

Allen looked relieved.

"Very well," he said. "You look after your affairs and I'll try to attend to mine," and turning on his heel, he walked stiffly away.

CHAPTER II

CHESTNUT CHARACTERISTICS

Chestnut Corner was not very much of a metropolis. As its name indicates, it was situated at the crossing of two roads. One of these was the old county road which connected the Corner, and the rest of Aroostook County, with the prosperous city of Bangor, seventy miles to the southwest, and thence with the great outside world beyond. In former years this road had been the main thoroughfare for all the traffic of the county. Over it daily ran a line of large stage-coaches, each drawn by four or six horses. These were almost invariably loaded to their utmost capacity. In addition to the stage-coaches, there was a daily succession of heavy "tote" teams, hauling the products of Aroostook to a market at Bangor, and bringing back with them all the articles of merchandise required for the county trade. Those were prosperous days for Chestnut Corner, and the arrival of the stage was always an event eagerly looked forward to with each recurring day.

The heavy "tote" teams that had regularly traversed the county road had also been an important feature in the daily affairs of the Corner. They frequently hauled up at Cobe Hersom's blacksmith shop to have horses

shod or repairing done, and were always surrounded by a group of eager questioners who found a never-failing source of interest in the budget of news the loquacious teamsters had collected all along the line. Those were certainly lively times for the Corner, and it was not strange that the older men, who still found a rendezvous at Squire Copeland's store, which, as in days of yore, continued to bear the post-office sign, and at Cobe Hersom's shop, where the proprietor still did business on a somewhat smaller scale, loved dearly to enlarge upon their glories.

The advent of the railroad at Bolton, eight miles from the Corner, had given the death-blow to stage-coaches and "tote" teams, and many who had never anticipated any other mode of travel than staging were heavy losers by the change. Others there were who had foreseen such a result, and had shrewdly disposed of their stage property. Among the latter was Andrew Benson, who had once been sole proprietor of the line of stage-coaches which passed through the Corner on the road between Bolton and Bangor. In addition to this, he had owned a majority of the heavy "tote" teams which traversed the same road. Foreseeing the decline of staging, he had sold his line and invested the proceeds in a beautiful farm about three miles below Chestnut Corner. His "tote" teams had been utilized in lumber operations.

At this time the large family which Mr. Benson had brought up were grown men and women, with homes of

their own. Among them was Henry Benson, who, by industry and economy, had been able to establish a large commission business in Bangor, and to accumulate a handsome property. Henry had two children: Clara, a quiet, sweet-faced girl of fourteen, and Raymond, two years older, to whom the reader has already been introduced.

City life had not been a good atmosphere for Raymond Benson. His superabundant energy and love of excitement had led him to select companions who were far from his parents' liking. They had frequently discussed their boy's future with much anxiety, and had finally decided that two or three years of country life would prove in every way beneficial to him. This decision was strengthened by a letter from Father Benson in which, under an attempt to appear cheerful, was a pathetic reference to the loneliness that he and "Mother" felt in the old home-nest from which all the young birds had flown. This letter decided Mr. Benson to send Raymond at once to the old homestead. Thus, a week later, the boy found himself domiciled under his grandfather's roof.

Grandfather Benson was a progressive man. He was always ready and anxious to learn of new and improved methods of cultivation, and it was largely due to this fact that his farm was among the most productive and profitable in the county. He had seen Chestnut grow from a wilderness into one of the most prosperous towns in Aroostook County. More than half a century

before, when only fifteen years of age, he had started in with his father to clear the place he then owned. They had built a small log camp upon the banks of the brook beside the spring, from which a hydraulic ram now forced a never-failing supply of pure water into a large tank beside the porch sink.

Those were days of hard work for Andrew Benson and his father. The ring of their busy axes was almost the only sound that broke the silence of the great primeval forest; but they brought to their labors rugged health, and the hearty appetites acquired by wholesome work in the open air. As they lay in their bunks at night, they frequently heard the howling of hungry wolves about the little clearing. Game was plentiful, and formed a most important item in their bill of fare. The brook fairly swarmed with trout, and many a delicious meal they pulled from its waters.

In time a respectable clearing was made in the forest, and, with the assistance of one or two friends from other clearings, a good-sized log house was erected near the camp. Here, the following spring, Mr. Benson brought the remainder of his family, a cheerful, industrious wife and two little girls. Then began a long, hard struggle for a livelihood. A number of other children were born, and it was often a puzzle to find the means for feeding all the hungry mouths that gathered at meal-time around the rude board table. Often, indeed, it was found necessary, especially when crops were short, to supplement the products of the farm

with fish and game, of which, happily, there was almost always an abundance.

But fortune favored this hardy, God-fearing family. Sickness was almost unknown among its members. The children grew into rugged, earnest, Christian men and women. Slowly, but surely, the wilderness was subdued, and the Benson farm became one of the best in the county. The old log house, between the rude timbers of which, where the wind had loosened the moss chinking, the snow had often sifted in on stormy winter nights, to pile itself in little drifts about the beds of the boys in the loft, was replaced by the more modern building which was still the farm home.

In time the children grew up and moved away—some of them to distant states. Andrew Benson alone, of all the number, continued to reside in Chestnut. He carried on the farm and made a comfortable home for his father and mother up to the time of their death. In return for this he was given the homestead. He continued to reside upon it until a large family of children were gathered about him. Then he sold the farm and purchased the old rambling tavern at Chestnut Corner, together with the stage-line between Bolton and Bangor. The years that followed were prosperous ones. All of Mr. Benson's children were earners, and the expenses of the family were watched over with frugal care. The girls helped their mother in the household duties of the tavern—Corner people would have smiled to hear it called a hotel,—and the boys,

relieved of farm duties, drove stage, and took care of the stable.

When the children had started out in life for themselves, each had accumulated enough by honest industry to be of considerable assistance to him, and still Father Benson retained a very respectable bank account in addition to his other property.

The habits of thrift and economy which the children had learned of their parents proved of great value to them in after years, and, in course of time, all were accounted well-to-do and several of them wealthy. Among the latter was Henry Benson, Raymond's father, who was justly considered one of the most prosperous and influential citizens of Bangor.

When all the children had left the old home, and their places in the work of the tavern were filled with hired help, the old building lost its charm for Father and Mother Benson. In these days they found the love of the old home farm returning with all the power it had exerted upon them in younger years. Andrew Benson was homesick, he told his wife with a wistful smile, for the old place; and finally, when a good opportunity presented itself, he had purchased it, sold the tavern and the stage-line, and moved back once more under the roof of the old home around which clustered so many tender memories of bygone days. Here he kept open house for all the Benson family, and during the warm summer months, it was seldom without a party of his grandchildren and their parents.

When Grandfather Benson had found himself back upon the old farm, he threw himself into the work of improving it with all the pride and energy which he had bestowed upon it in former years. It would have seemed to most men as if little remained to be done. The farm was in an excellent state of cultivation, and the buildings upon it were in thorough repair. Grandfather Benson, however, found many things to do. The meadow-land about the brook was carefully under-drained, and transformed into a magnificent hay-field. The large orchard was thoroughly renovated. Old trees were grafted with scions of the finest varieties, and a large number of choice young trees were set out.

"If I do not gather the fruit of these," Mr. Benson had said to his wife, with a smile, when she cautioned him against working so hard, "it will pay me enough for all my trouble to see them grow." The good man, however, had already been enjoying the fruit of these trees for several years when Raymond came to him.

When the work in the orchard was completed, Grandfather Benson began an innovation that filled his worthy neighbors with amazement, and was soon the talk of the town, forming the subject of many an earnest discussion around the big stove in Squire Copeland's Corner store. To be sure the matter might not have appeared of great importance to the world at large, but in Chestnut events that were not of special moment in themselves sometimes assumed unexpected interest from their surroundings. So with Andrew

Benson's improvements upon the old farm. The worthy townspeople had declared it all folly for a man of his years and property to work so incessantly. The great influence that he had always exerted in town matters gave his affairs unusual interest to Chestnut citizens. His "new-fangled notions" were always a fruitful theme of discussion at the sewing-circle and the post-office.

But everybody agreed that Grandfather Benson's latest eccentricity exceeded anything in that line of which he had before been guilty. It was nothing less than the clearing up of the unsightly rubbish by the roadside in front of his farm, and the planting of a row of apple trees along the whole length of the strip of land thus reclaimed. Chestnut people could appreciate the clearing up of the rubbish, and voted it an idea in every way worthy of emulation; but they were unable to conceive of any sufficient reason for the apple trees.

"I hope you don't expect to get any apples from those trees," Mr. Grover had said, as he came one day upon Grandfather Benson busily engaged in setting out the last of them.

"Why not?" was the response.

"Because they'll be stolen."

"I don't believe they will be. Doubtless a few will be taken, but I sha'n't object to that. If any man who is going by here in the fall when these trees are bearing wants an apple or two, I shall be perfectly willing to

let him have them. After all such people are satisfied, I think there will be quite a number of apples left for me to gather."

"I'm blest if I believe it, Andrew," said Mr. Grover, with an incredulous shake of his head. "I've had some experience with apple thieves, and I don't feel any too sure. Why, I had to keep a constant watch over my orchard last fall. If I hadn't, I really don't believe I should have gathered any apples at all. As it was, I lost a number of bushels, and it was back from the road, too. These trees that you have planted here will have no protection whatever. Everybody will have an opportunity to help themselves."

"Well, one thing is certain," responded Mr. Benson, with a smile. "If they get what they want here, they won't go into my orchard for apples; so that, after all, by your own admission, I shall be better off than you are."

"Yes, if you are willing to throw away all your hard work, and have these trees count you nothing."

"But they will count me something, won't they, if they protect my orchard, and save me the trouble of watching it?"

"Yes, but nothing compared with the value of the apples you will lose. Just as long as no fruit, to amount to anything, is raised in the upper part of the county, there will always be an inducement for thieves to raid our orchards. I shall be glad when the people up north get orchards of their own. Then there will

be no demand there for fruit to stimulate our own and other rascals to steal it from our orchards."

"Do you think that some of those fellows live here in Chestnut?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it. In fact, I feel morally sure who some of them are. It would be a very difficult, if not an impossible thing, though, to prove it to a legal certainty. We must wait for the growth of orchards up north before we can really expect to be let alone by such knaves."

"Yes, but when that thing comes about, we shall have lost our fine market for fruit," responded Mr. Benson. "Now I'll tell you just how I happened to plant these trees here. I think that you'll agree with me that it isn't such a foolish notion as some of my neighbors have imagined. I had intended at first to set out maples, but it occurred to me that I could get varieties of apple trees that would look about as well and have the added advantage of usefulness. If all the apples are taken, I shall be just as well off as I would have been if I had planted maples. If I get any fruit from them, it will be clear gain, for it's no more work to set them out than it would be to set out the maples, and there isn't much difference in the cost of getting them."

"I don't know but that you are right, Andrew," conceded Mr. Grover. "You have a way of looking clean round a thing," and he continued on his way home, a convert to the innovation.

But Grandfather Benson did not cease his improvements upon the old place with the changes on the road-front. He built a fence about the whole farm that was the admiration of all who saw it, and that soon became known far and near as the finest in the county. It was built of whole cedar logs, of which there was an abundance upon the farm. The bottom log rested upon a granite underpinning. The fence was six rails high, the top rail along the road-front being securely bolted on. This was a precautionary measure, and grew out of Grandfather Benson's observation of the fact that rail fences were chiefly endangered by the practice of teamsters in taking off fence-rails for use as levers in the drifts of winter, and in the mire of early spring. Broad as was Grandfather Benson's philanthropy, it was not sufficient for the sacrifice of that new fence to the needs of Chestnut teamsters.

Few men in Chestnut were as well educated as Grandfather Benson, and doubtless his ability to speak and write good English—an accomplishment upon which he specially prided himself—was largely responsible for the influence he exerted in town affairs.

Raymond entered with enthusiasm into all his grandfather's plans. In fact, he found his life on the old place far pleasanter than he had anticipated. His grandparents were devotedly attached to him, and did everything in their power to make him happy and contented. There was also an interest for him in the farm work, for Grandfather Benson knew exactly how

to awaken it. He had made Raymond a confidant, advising with him about the crops and the care of the stock, and readily accepting his suggestions when they were good ones. Raymond was given three late calves, which Mr. Benson had intended to kill, a colt, four lambs, and two dozen hens, and he was thus imbued with the personal pride and interest in the creatures about him that came from a sense of proprietorship. Then, too, he had an acre of land all for his own, the products of which he was permitted to dispose of as he pleased. This he planted to potatoes, the great money crop in Aroostook. When fall came, he harvested a yield of one hundred and fifty bushels, which he sold at the starch factories and at the Bolton market, clearing the snug little sum of sixty dollars.

It was the second week in September that the Free High School at Chestnut Corner began, under the instruction of David Beecham, a State College student, who had taught the district school the previous winter with flattering success. It had been a question with Raymond how he should get to and from the Corner in attending school. This was soon satisfactorily settled. Ned Grover, who lived on the adjoining farm, was also going to attend the school, and boasted among his possessions a spirited four-year-old colt. This, with an old harness and buggy of Grandfather Benson's, provided the boys with as fine a team as they could possibly have desired. What beautiful drives they had enjoyed through the crisp morning air!

CHAPTER III

TOM ATKINS GETS A TUMBLE

"I can show you a trick worth two of that."

It was Raymond Benson who spoke. He and Ned Grover had been watching some Corner boys who were angling for victims in front of Squire Copeland's store with an old pocketbook, to the under part of which was attached a stout linen thread. Several people had stooped to pick it up, only to see it elude their grasp and vanish quickly round the corner, where Jim Farris and Elmer Cole, who were engineering the sell, were stationed. In every instance the victims had joined heartily in the laugh which greeted their momentary surprise and discomfiture, and had taken a good position to enjoy thoroughly the chagrin of the next victim. But this sport had begun to grow a trifle monotonous. No victim had put in an appearance for some time, and the hardest thing in the world for live boys to do is to do nothing. All had grown tired of waiting, and eagerly gathered around Raymond to hear what he was about to propose. They had implicit faith in his powers to originate plans for amusement.

"Let's have it," they chorused.

"You see, fellows," said Raymond, "it's a secret.

Only Ned and I know it. Now I'm willing to let you into it one at a time, but no more. Each one of you must promise, honest injun, not to give it away. If all of you don't agree that it's better than that old pocketbook trick, I'll eat my hat. Now let every fellow who wants to know it hold up his hand."

Every boy but one promptly responded.

"Don't you want to know it?" asked Raymond of Tom Atkins, who had refrained from holding up a hand with the others.

"No, I guess not."

"Why?"

"Oh, I reckon you've got crowd enough without me."

"Yes, I guess so, too," said Raymond, sarcastically. "When a fellow hasn't sand enough to stand in with the other boys, he doesn't really count for anything. I wash my hands of him."

"That's so, we don't want him, anyway," came in a chorus of agreement from several of the boys, and Tom, finding the atmosphere a decidedly frigid one, and fearing, perhaps, that he might be made the victim of his companions' displeasure, walked sullenly away and entered the store.

"I'm glad he's gone," said Raymond.

"So am I," added Harry Oakley.

"He always was one of the meanest fellows in the town," chimed in Sam Brown.

"It's all right, boys," said Raymond. "If he doesn't want to join us, he needn't. Nobody here appears to

want him very badly, anyway. Now we'll come to business. I will stay here on the store steps with you, and Ned will be out behind the building on the platform of Bill Gleason's carriage shop. You fellows may go round there, one at a time, and he will initiate you into the trick. When you've all learned we'll get together, if you wish, and see which one of us can do it the best."

"That's first rate!" was the general exclamation among the boys, who by this time were very much interested in Raymond's new scheme, and exceedingly curious as to the nature of it.

Harry Oakley was the first boy to go to Ned around the corner of the store. It was evident that he was somewhat suspicious of what might be in store for him.

"Well, what is it, old man?" he grinned, with a look of apprehension. "You haven't a stuffed club under your coat, have you?"

"No, I don't carry concealed weapons," returned Ned, carelessly. "It really isn't half as bad as you suspect, old man. Just sit down beside me on this platform, and I'll show you."

"Let 'er go, Gallagher," laughed Harry, as he followed Ned's directions.

"You see this rock," continued Ned, exhibiting a cobblestone about the size of a baseball.

"Sure, I'm all eyes."

"Well, the scheme is to put your hands under your legs from the outside, right here by your knees, and

see how far you can throw this rock in front of you from that position."

"Is that all?" asked Harry, in a tone of disappointment.

"Isn't that enough, my boy? It looks easy, but I reckon you'll find it considerably more of a trick than you imagine."

"Pooh! That's easy—dead easy," asserted Harry, confidently.

Ned smiled indulgently.

"It would seem so at first thought," he admitted.

Harry took the rock and looked at it a little dubiously.

"Oh, it's straight goods. It's a rock all right," laughed Ned.

"You hold it, like this, in both hands?"

"Yes."

"And throw it from between your legs?"

"Exactly."

"Why, a baby could do that. Well, here goes. Great Scott!"

This last expression was one of genuine surprise. Before Harry could throw the rock, Ned had seized him firmly by both wrists, and lifting him clear off the platform, dropped him gently to the ground, where he struck with a force and abruptness that, as he afterwards expressed it, "made his ears snap."

"Well, what do you think of it now?" asked Ned, coolly, when Harry had recovered somewhat from his astonishment.

"It's great! I never felt quite so helpless in my life. You had me foul," laughed Harry.

"I thought you'd say so."

"Am I to stay here and see the other fellows initiated?"

"Yes, that's a privilege of the wise."

"Well, call the next candidate."

"See here, my boy, you must keep a sober face on you," cautioned Ned, "and mind you're all enthusiasm."

"Have no fears of that. I was completely carried away by it."

The next victim was Sam Brown, and the way Harry rolled upon the platform in a perfect paroxysm of laughter at the figure his friend cut was a sufficient proof of the sincerity of his conversion. In this way all the boys were initiated into the mysteries of Raymond's new game. As Ned was instructing the last one, Raymond, who was about to join the boys and witness the sport, was surprised to see Tom Atkins steal from the opposite side of the building and enter the store.

"The mean skunk! I'll bet he's been spying," he thought, and turning about he went into the store, where he found Tom seated upon the counter, explaining the new game to an interested crowd of grinning loafers.

"You see, all the other boys were just green enough to bite," he was saying. "They'll do anything Ray-

mond Benson wants them to, but I was a little too sharp for him. He tried to bluff me into it, but found that it wouldn't work. There are one or two people in the world just as smart as he is."

"And you stole out on the other side of the store and took in the fun, did you?" asked Bill Gleason, who spent more time holding down the nail kegs in Squire Copeland's store than he did in his carriage shop.

"Yes, I saw them put three fellows through. Ha! Ha! It was great fun, I tell you," and Tom laughed heartily at the recollection.

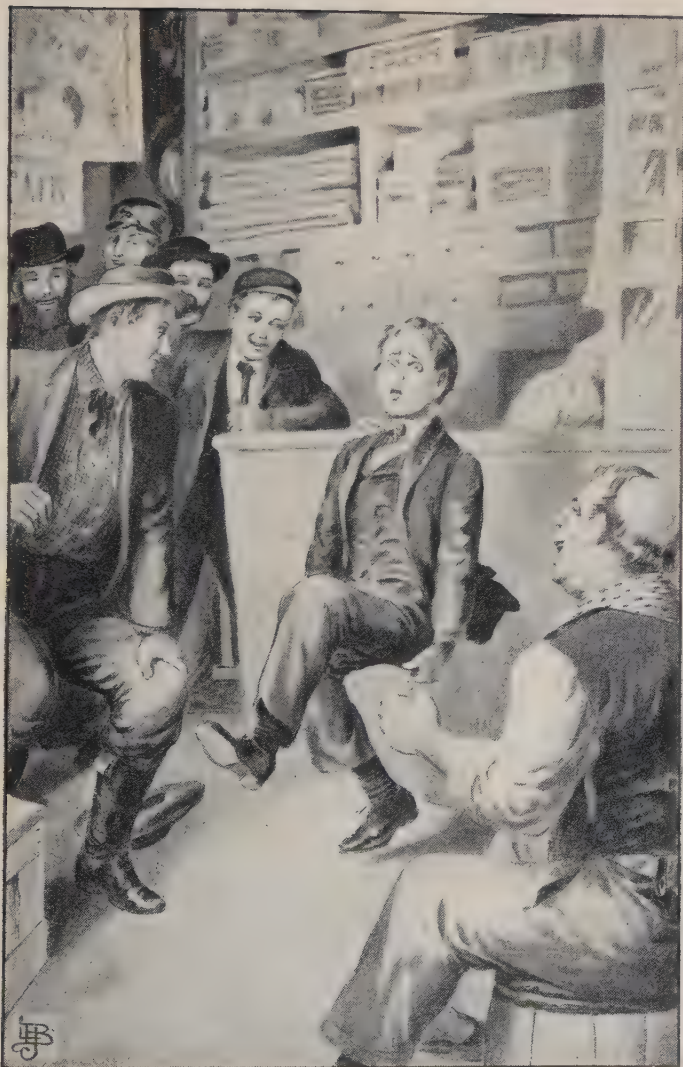
"Look here, Tom, that won't wash. I guess you're stuffing us," declared big Joel Webber, who had been holding a whispered conversation with Raymond Benson behind the post-office boxes.

"No, I'm not. I saw the thing worked on three different fellows."

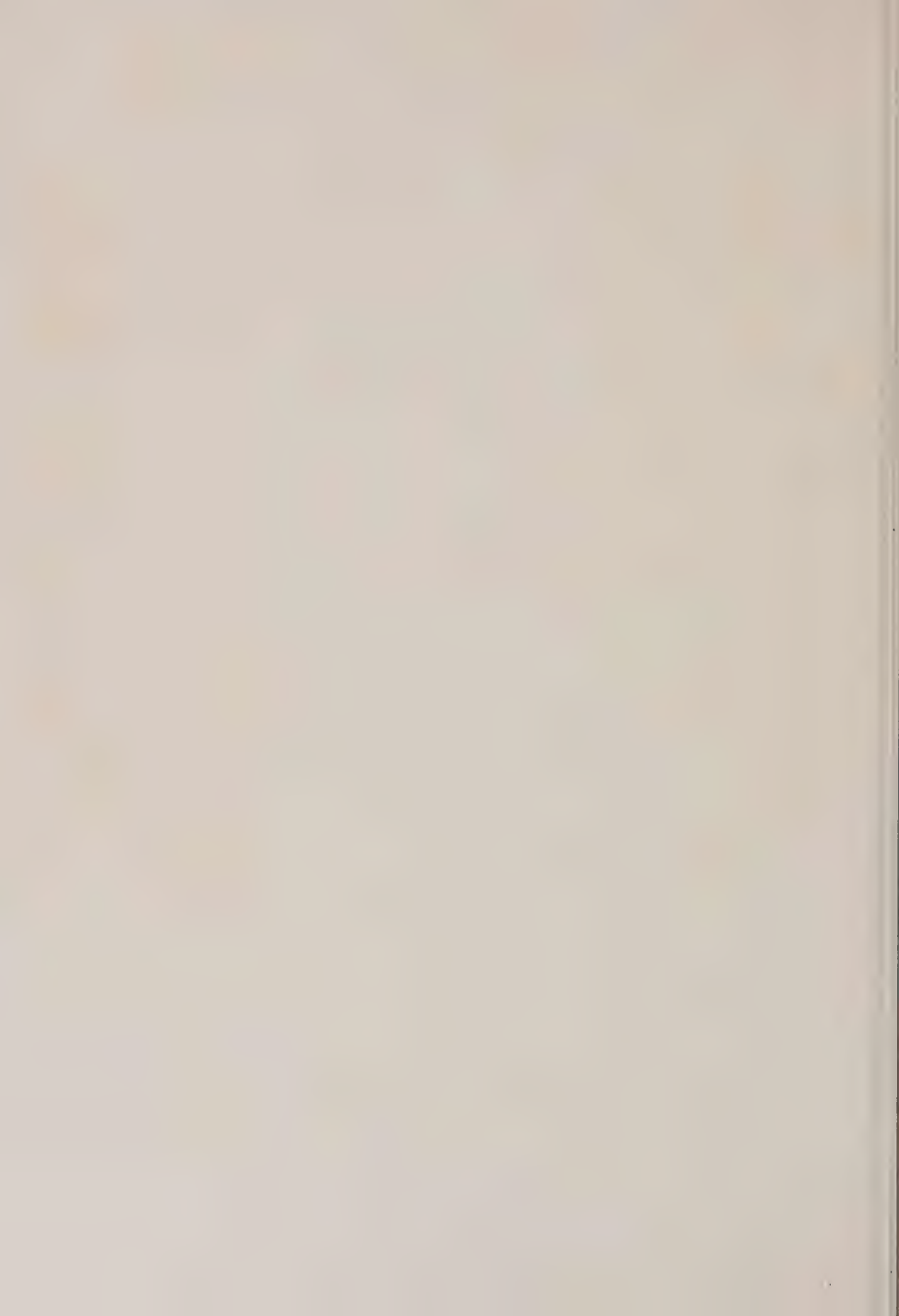
"How did they do it?"

"Why," said Tom, who was only waiting for this invitation to tell what he knew. "You see Ned had them sit down on the platform of Bill's shop, put their hands under their legs, so, and—"

But he didn't complete his sentence. The moment his hands passed under his legs, Joel seized him with an iron grip by both wrists, and lifting him clear off the counter, dropped him upon the floor, where he struck with a force that made his hair stand on end, and brought out all the rattle in every piece of crockery and hardware in the store.



"OH, I SHALL BE LAME FOR A MONTH!"—Page 31.



There was a perfect roar of laughter from those present, which was heartily joined in by Ned Grover and the other boys, who, having finished their sport, entered the store just in time to witness Tom's grand tumble.

"Oh, I shall be lame for a month! I shall be lame for a month!" howled the unhappy victim, as he limped to a seat on a neighboring nail keg. "That's your work, Benson. I'll get even with you some day," he added, fiercely.

"I thought Joel did it," laughed Raymond.

"Well, you put him up to it. Enjoy your fun now. My turn will come some day, and then it won't be such a laughing matter for you."

"I begin to see, fellows, why Tom didn't join us," said Raymond, turning to the boys.

"Why was it?"

"He felt a little high-toned and wanted an initiation indoors all by himself."

A boisterous shout of laughter greeted this announcement.

"Yes, but there was probably another reason," chimed in Ned Grover.

"What was that?" asked several of the boys.

"The drop from the platform of Bill's shop wasn't far enough for him."

Again the boys indulged their merriment and the loafers at the store joined heartily in the laugh.

"You fellows may get all the fun out of this you

can," growled Tom, who was fairly choking with rage and mortification. "My innings will come later on."

"Yes, but perhaps you can't bat our curves," returned Raymond Benson over his shoulder, as he followed his companions out of the store.

"Oh, yes. You're a wonder—you're a wizard," sneered Tom, and there was a look on his face that boded no good to the object of his anger.

"He's a mean fellow, and I'm glad to see him taken down a peg," said Elmer Cole, when the boys had assembled again in front of Cobe Hersom's shop.

"So am I," was the hearty rejoinder from a number of the group.

"We mustn't be too hard on him, fellows," said Raymond, soberly. "I guess we've rubbed it in enough. He's the under dog just now, and we can afford to be generous toward him. Besides, we must remember that he has never had the chance that most of us have."

"That's so," added Ned. "I've heard father say many a time that it would be the greatest blessing that could happen to this town if old Pete Atkins and his tribe would move away from it."

"If justice were done I guess two or three of them would leave town and board at government expense," said Sam Brown.

"How so?" asked Raymond.

"Why, you don't suppose the whiskey old Pete sells ever pays any duty, do you?"

"I have never thought much about it."

"Well, you may just make up your mind that it doesn't. There is reason to believe that every gill of it is smuggled across the line."

"Why don't the Custom House officers at Bolton stop him?" asked Jim Farris.

"That's easier said than done, my boy," answered Ned Grover.

"I don't know why. The government pays those officers to see that duties are collected on everything that comes across the line. It seems to me they can't be attending to their work very well when they permit a man to smuggle liquor almost under their noses."

"They'd have to have mighty long noses to smell out all the liquor along the whole line," persisted Ned.

"I don't see why they can't do it," declared Jim. "That's what they are there for."

"How many officers are there at Bolton?"

"I don't know."

"Well, there are only three. These, with three deputies who are stationed in the northern part of the county, make up the whole force of the Custom House. It seems to me that six men would have to spread themselves out pretty thin to stop smuggling on a frontier one hundred and fifty miles long, and covered nearly the entire distance with a dense forest growth."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"I didn't suppose you had. Most of us haven't. It's the fashion around here to blame the Custom House officers if every one who smuggles anything through

the woods isn't discovered and brought to trial. I think they do everything they can, though. It must take about all their time to look after matters at Bolton, where the bulk of the imports come. I don't see where they'd find much chance for patrolling the country crossroads, let alone a hundred and fifty miles of wilderness."

"You're right, Ned," said Raymond. "Where people live within eight miles of the Canada line, as we do, it is impossible to prevent more or less smuggling. Grandfather says he has never known a time when it wasn't carried on to some extent, and never expects to, while the present conditions exist."

"The officers do catch them sometimes, don't they?" asked Harry Oakley.

"Oh, yes, frequently. At the last term of the United States circuit court at Portland there were five from this county tried on that very charge."

"What was done with them?"

"One of them was discharged for lack of evidence, two were heavily fined, and two sent to prison."

"I should think that would sicken them of the business."

"It very likely will, those particular ones, but they are a very small fraction of the men who are engaged in this business. It isn't altogether whiskey that's smuggled, either."

"I guess, if the truth were known, old Pete Atkins's operations are not confined to that," said Sam Brown.

"What makes you think so?" asked Raymond.

"Oh, evidence I've seen," replied Sam, laughing.

"What was that?" inquired Ned, scenting a story.

"Well, early this fall, when my cousin Dick Richards was visiting me from Portland, I took him down on Letter K, where Amos Dole operated the winter before, intending to use his old log camp on the banks of Bower Brook, and have two or three days' hunting and trout fishing. We carried everything necessary for the trip in packs on our backs, and reached the camp about dusk. To our surprise we found it occupied. Old Pete Atkins and a stranger—a swarthy-faced, rough-looking fellow, about forty years of age—were there before us. They greeted us cordially enough, and invited us to come right in and have supper with them. We noticed, however, that they didn't have anything to say about our staying all night, and it was plain to me they were not much pleased at our coming. After supper the stranger went outside, and sat down on a log near the camp to smoke his pipe, but old Pete sat on a bench by the table, and, while he did his best to be sociable, we couldn't help feeling that, so far at least as he was concerned, our room would have been a good deal preferable to our company. Two or three times I caught him watching us under those shaggy brows of his, and out of the corners of his eyes, in a way that made me feel mighty uncomfortable.

"How long were you calculating to stop?" he asked.

“ ‘Only two or three days,’ I said. ‘We were planning to get a few partridges, and try the trout on Bower Brook. You haven’t any objections to our stopping here have you?’ ”

“ ‘Not a bit. You’ve got just as much right here as I have. Make yourself perfectly at home. I guess you’ll find it easier to fix up that small bunk in the corner of the cook-room than to come in here with us.’ With that he went out doors and joined the other man in the clearing. After we had stowed our things in a corner of the mess camp we went outside. Neither Pete nor the other fellow was in sight, but we could hear them holding a very earnest conversation in the horse hovel.”

“It was very certain that they didn’t want you in the bunk room with them,” commented Raymond.

“That was evident enough,” assented Sam; “but we didn’t care to stay any closer to them than was absolutely necessary—especially as there was a nice little bunk in one corner of the mess room.”

“Yes, Raymond and I built that a year ago,” interposed Ned.

“Well, it’s all right, and was a perfect godsend to us that night,” said Sam.

“Go on, old man,” urged Raymond, impatiently. “What did old Pete and his Man Friday do then?”

“Oh, nothing special,” resumed Sam. “They were both very friendly and invited us to sit by their fire in the bunk camp until it was time for us to turn in for the

night in our bunk in the mess camp. They smoked their pipes beside the big Franklin stove, but neither of them had very much to say to us. I noticed that they had several large packs in one corner of the camp, and they were not filled with bottles or jugs either, for old Pete threw a large iron bar that stood in one corner of the camp upon them in a way that showed he wasn't afraid of smashing anything."

"Perhaps he just did it for a blind," suggested Ned.

"No, I think not. He wouldn't have dared to take a chance like that if there was anything there that could break."

"I guess that's right," admitted Ned, "but I reckon he had some purpose in doing it."

"We stayed over night with them," continued Sam, "and I think we were tired enough to sleep pretty soundly. At any rate when we woke in the morning they were gone, and so was the iron bar and their packs. I would have given a good deal to know what was in them."

"Very likely the Custom House officers would, too," added Raymond.

When the boys, who had been walking as they talked, arrived at the schoolhouse, they found that their morning sport had made them half an hour late, but Mr. Beecham forebore to reprimand them.

CHAPTER IV

LETTER K AND ITS MYSTERIES

The Letter K to which Sam Brown had referred, in discussing the smuggling question, was an unincorporated township some eight miles below Chestnut Corner. It was a wild, desolate place, covered with a heavy growth of timber. Through it ran Bower Brook, a good-sized stream, which terminated on the swamp-lands at the lower end of the township in a long stretch of deep, sluggish current called the Dead Water. Here fishermen who had the courage to work their way from the timber ridges across the stretch of bog that intervened, were said to catch the most beautiful trout that were to be found anywhere in that section of the State.

The township also abounded in game. Every fall large flocks of partridges came forth from it to feed along the borders of the county road. A number of bears were annually trapped upon it. Cobe Hersom kept a score of heavy steel traps set for them all over the township, and scarcely a year passed that he did not succeed in capturing five or six.

A year before Raymond came to make his home with his grandparents, he had passed the two weeks of the fall vacation with them on the old place. He and Ned

Grover had improved the opportunity to enjoy a week's hunting trip to Letter K. Ned, who had often fished and hunted upon the township, was thoroughly familiar with it, and knew precisely the location of every camp and wood road. To Raymond, however, the section was entirely new, and the vast forest solitudes, with the primeval timber growth still towering in majesty against the fitful blue of the sky, impressed him with a sense of grandeur and awe that he had never experienced before.

Half way down the bush-grown tote road that led to the old camp on the banks of Bower Brook—formerly used in a big lumber operation, and still affording a refuge and resting-place for fishing and hunting parties—they had paused to rest awhile upon a decaying and moss-covered log that lay just beyond the wheel ruts at the edge of a bog hole. On the back side of this log was a small, running vine, a section of which was laid back by Ned, revealing a number of small, white, oval-shaped berries.

"What are those, ant's eggs?" demanded Raymond.

Ned laughed indulgently.

"Not at all," he explained. "They are what we call ivy plums."

"But I thought ivy plums were scarlet," protested Raymond.

"You're thinking of wintergreen or checkerberry," said Ned. "This is the so-called ivy of our Northern woods, and these are its berries."

"Are they good to eat?"

"Here, try them," and Ned passed him a handful he had picked.

Raymond ate them, and found their delicate acid flavor very agreeable to the taste.

"I should think the birds wouldn't pass such a good thing by," he said.

"There are very few song-birds in the deep woods," responded Ned. "They are sociable, and do not like the solitudes."

"Yes," assented Raymond, "I've noticed that they seem to have a liking for human society."

"The partridges are very fond of these little ivy plums," continued Ned, "and you will almost always find a flock near any place where they grow."

Raymond was about to reply when Ned held up a warning hand.

"There's one now," he whispered, reaching for his double-barreled shot-gun which leaned against the end of the log.

A sharp report brought a fine, plump partridge tumbling from a fir tree near by.

"Here's a good dinner for us," cried Ned, as he held it up exultingly. "Your turn will come next," he added quickly, noting the eager look on Raymond's face.

The prophecy proved to be correct, for, by the time they reached the log camp on Bower Brook, they had a string of four birds, two of which were a tribute to Raymond's marksmanship.

The camp was one of the typical structures used in lumber operations. It stood just far enough back from the bank of the stream to allow space for a roadway in front. There were two big log houses standing end to end and connected with an intervening shed called a "dingle." The roofs were made of cedar "splits"—thin rough boards split with axe and wedge out of cedar logs—and the floors were of hewn timber. One of the camps was used wholly for sleeping purposes. Two long berths—one above the other—extended the entire length of the camp on either side. A big Franklin stove stood in the center of the room midway between the berths. A solitary window in the end of the building opposite the dingle was the only source of light. The cracks between the logs were carefully stuffed or "chinked" with moss; and, although somewhat draughty, with plenty of stove wood, and an abundance of blankets, a crew of men were able to winter there in comparative comfort. The bunks in a camp of this kind are first covered with fine fir boughs, over which the blankets are spread. Upon them the men sleep side by side with their feet towards the fire. In front of the bunks, on either side of the room, is a rough bench extending nearly its entire length, and known as the "deacon seat." Here the men sit and smoke after supper in the glowing heat of a roaring fire, exchanging the stories and rough repartee characteristic of the daily life in a logging camp.

The log building on the opposite side of the dingle

was the camp kitchen and "mess" room. On either side of this room extended a long table of rough boards. Rude benches of equal length and similar to those used in the bunk house for deacon seats, served the purpose of chairs. In the center of the room, about equidistant from the ends, were two large cook-stoves, and one corner was devoted to a rude wooden sink and cooking bench. This camp house was better lighted than the other, boasting no less than four windows, two in the end opposite the door leading from the dingle, and one on either side about midway of the room.

It was nearly noon when Raymond and Ned reached this camp. A chip fire was made in front of the dingle upon which they cooked some tea, and fried, in a generous allowance of pork fat, two of the partridges, which Ned dressed with a dexterity surprising to Raymond. The long walk through the deep woods had sharpened their appetites, and Raymond declared the repast in every way fit for a king.

The work of cleaning up the mess camp and making it habitable kept them busily employed during the whole afternoon.

They decided to forego the bunk house in which was a mouldy collection of old rubbers, moccasins, shoes, and various articles of clothing, which had been abandoned by members of the logging crew when they had left the camp the previous spring.

A bunk was fixed up in one corner of the cook-house.

When it had been lined with fresh boughs, and covered with their blankets, when several cracks between the logs had been chinked with new moss and a roaring fire built in the two cook-stoves, Raymond declared that he would like nothing better than to spend the winter there.

During the early part of the evening a light snow fell, which, about the middle of the night, changed to a drizzling rain. A sharp fall in the temperature followed the storm, and when Ned stood in the dingle the following morning and looked out into the woods, he could not restrain an exclamation of regret.

"We're dished!" he declared, mournfully.

"Why, what's the matter?" demanded Raymond. "It looks to me like a bright sunshiny day."

"So it is," admitted Ned, "but just look at that crust."

"Well, what of that?"

"What of that?" repeated Ned, in disgust. "Why you don't suppose we can get within a mile of a deer under these conditions, do you? It's no use, the jig's up. They could hear us coming half way across the township."

"Well, we could get a good position on some ridge and wait for them, couldn't we?" asked Raymond, hopefully.

"Yes, we could do that," admitted Ned, "but with the noise we should make in getting there, I don't believe that anything in the shape of a deer would show up the same day."

Ned's opinion proved to be correct. Although they devoted the next few days to the most assiduous hunting, not a glimpse of a deer rewarded their efforts; nevertheless, the woods were full of their tracks, and on several occasions they came near enough to hear them very distinctly as they raced away through the underbrush.

On several afternoons the boys lay hidden on the crest of hardwood ridges, where the deer tracks were especially plentiful, in the hopes of securing a shot at big game, but their efforts were unavailing. Their presence, however, was always the occasion of a chattering protest from the red squirrels that swarmed the ridges in search of beechnuts, and who held noisy indignation meetings in the tall tree-tops, to voice their displeasure at the unwelcome intrusion.

"Confound the little rascals!" said Raymond, resentfully. "I believe they are telling the deer we are here."

"I shouldn't wonder if they were," admitted Ned, "and the worst of it is that they keep it up. Seems to me a deer would have to be pretty thick-headed who didn't smell a rat with that warning."

"I'm a good mind to shoot one or two of them," said Raymond raising his rifle.

"Look out!" cautioned Ned. "If we've got any chance to get a deer here, you would certainly throw it away with the first shot."

Raymond forbore to shoot, but the afternoon wore away with no sight of a deer to reward their patience.

The evening shadows were throwing their sombre veil upon the wood roads when they finally made their way back to camp, tired and discouraged.

The following morning, as Raymond stepped from the camp door into the dingle, with his rifle under his arm, he was utterly dazed to see a fine buck leisurely drinking midway of the brook, and nearly opposite the camp. For a moment he thought his eyes were deceiving him—and then the impulse came to tell Ned, but the fear of losing the game dissuaded him from this purpose, and drawing a careful bead upon the deer he let fly at him, only to see him scramble nimbly up the bank on the opposite side of the brook, and disappear in the bushes.

“What’s the trouble?” demanded Ned, hastily making his appearance at the camp door, rifle in hand.

“A great, big buck!” gasped Raymond. “He was drinking right there in the brook.”

“Are you sure?” asked Ned, incredulously.

“Sure! Of course I am,” retorted Raymond, indignantly. “I saw him just as plainly as I do you.”

“Where did he go?”

“Right up the bank on the other side there.”

“Let’s go over and see,” continued Ned.

They crossed the brook on a big log a short distance below the camp, and made their way to the place where Raymond had seen the buck disappear. Here Ned’s doubts were cleared away. There in the snow were the tracks to prove Raymond’s assertions.

"My, wasn't he going though?" said Ned, admiringly, as he examined them. "See what long bounds he took."

"Do you suppose I hit him?" asked Raymond.

"No, old boy," said Ned, frankly. "I don't think you touched a hair. It was a clear case of buck fever."

"What's buck fever?" demanded Raymond, a little resentfully.

"It's a condition of nervous daze that prevents sportsmen from shooting straight when they draw a bead upon their first deer," explained Ned. "You needn't feel cut up about it, old boy," he added sympathetically, noting Raymond's long face. "You're not the first one to have it by any means. In fact, it's very common. I've had it myself, and know all about it."

Raymond laughed ruefully. "It's comforting to know that I'm not alone in my weakness," he said, "but that doesn't supply us with venison."

The following day the boys broke camp, and made their way dejectedly towards the county road to meet the team which Grandfather Benson was to send for them. It was a mild day, and by noon the warm rays of the sun had thoroughly softened up the crust, and vastly improved the conditions for hunting.

"It's just as I expected," groaned Raymond. "Now that we've got to go, it begins to look as if we might do some business."

"It isn't too late yet," said Ned consolingly. "We're liable to run onto a deer anywhere along this tote road,

and even along the county road until we get out of the timber. If you could only get one I should be entirely satisfied."

"I should want you to get one, too," said Raymond.

"Oh, I've already had my experience," replied Ned, laughingly, "and expect to have it again. It's your turn now."

For a time they walked along in silence. Presently they emerged from the spruce growth and made their way along a hard-wood ridge. They had gone but a short distance on this part of the road when Raymond, who was in advance, stopped abruptly, and faced sharply to one side. Following the direction of his look, Ned perceived a noble buck standing in plain view half-way up the hill on the opposite side of the ravine.

"Steady!" he whispered, as Raymond drew a careful bead on the game with his Winchester.

A sharp report rang through the woods, and, with a spasmodic leap, the buck fell to the ground.

Raymond turned exultingly to Ned just in season to catch him in the act of lowering his rifle.

"Did you shoot, too?" he asked in surprise.

"No," returned Ned, with a smile. "I just thought I'd be ready to shoot in case you had another attack of buck fever. You didn't need me, however. I'm very sure you must have shot him through the heart. He dropped pretty nearly in his tracks."

In a short time the deer was dressed and hung up by the hind legs on a tree beside the road.

"I tell you what, Ned," said Raymond, as he viewed his trophy admiringly, "I'm well convinced that this is the very buck I shot at in front of the camp."

"Possibly," said Ned, dubiously. "If it isn't it's one just as good. It's lucky, too, that you got him here instead of back at the camp. It's only a mile to the county road, and the tote road is comparatively smooth from here out. We can bring the horse and pung in here, and load your game without much trouble."

Raymond came in for some very complimentary remarks that afternoon, when he and Ned hauled up in front of Squire Copeland's store, and exhibited his prize. Ned, with his customary loyalty, refrained from giving the village jokers the satisfaction they would have found in a knowledge of Raymond's attack of buck fever.

That night the big buck hung under a shed at the Benson farm, and Raymond awoke in the morning to find that some one had cut off the head, with its fine set of antlers, and carried it away. He was unable to imagine who could have been guilty of such an act, and it was not until several weeks later, when the head was returned, beautifully mounted, by a well-known Bangor taxidermist, that he recognized Grandfather Benson as the miscreant. Thenceforth this trophy of his hunting prowess held the place of honor in Raymond's room, being firmly established midway of the wall at the foot of his bed.

There were many Chestnut people who firmly believed

that deer and bears were not the only large game to be found on Letter K. There were reports of fiercer animals having been seen upon it. Ezra Johnston had set the whole Corner wild two years before our story opens with a thrilling account of a mysterious wild animal which had followed him for several miles through the township. He was returning from Mattawamkeag, where he had been to get a load of iron for Cobe Hersom. Just as he got into the middle of Letter K, where its dense timber growth almost overlapped the county road, he observed what he at first took to be a large dog following his team. Upon a second look, however, he discovered that it was not a dog, but a wild animal somewhat resembling a large cat. Ezra declared that he could see its great yellow eyes gleaming through the pitchy darkness, and hear its jaws snap together in anticipation of the supper it was about to enjoy. He noted the fact that its fur was quite long and of a light brown color. The chances of escape looked small, but he whipped his horse into a gallop, and took a firm grip on one of the shorter iron bars, determined to make as brave a fight as possible. Looking behind him, he saw the animal following him at an easy trot, but keeping a respectful distance from the wagon. The reason of this suddenly occurred to him. The beast was afraid of the rattling made by the iron. It did not dare to spring upon the team, but was determined to keep it in view.

Thenceforth Ezra always declared that the most

cheering sight he ever saw in his life was the light of the clearing beyond the woods, when it finally came in view. He looked behind him, and to his intense relief saw the mysterious animal turn about and disappear in the darkness of the forest. It had been a close shave, but he was safe. Then and there he formed the solemn resolution never again to venture into the wilds of Letter K unless he was thoroughly armed.

There was an excited crowd of loafers at Squire Copeland's store when Ezra drew up in front of it, his horse covered with foam, and, with white face, related the details of his startling adventure. For more than a week it was the talk of the whole town. It was the general opinion that the mysterious animal was none other than an Indian devil (a provincialism for cougar, or, as the early settlers had called it, catamount). Some inclined to the belief that it was a lynx, but this Ezra emphatically denied. He had killed altogether too many of those in his life not to know one when he saw it.

And so the wonder grew. Many people became timid about venturing out after dark, and there were few in town who cared to pass unarmed through a piece of woods at night, if it could be avoided. Several hunting parties were formed to find the mysterious animal, and Letter K was thoroughly scoured, but all in vain. Not a trace of it could be discovered.

As time went on public confidence in Ezra's story began to wane. The loafers who had been at Squire

Copeland's store that night suddenly remembered that a strong odor of whiskey had flavored the old man's excited description of his adventure. Then there were some few inconsistencies in the story itself. How, it was argued, could Ezra have possibly distinguished the light brown color of the animal in the pitchy darkness of Letter K woods on a night when there was neither moon nor stars? Then again, how could an Indian devil *trot* behind his team, when its method of locomotion was generally understood to be by long bounds? Why, too, should the rattle of iron bars have kept it from the attack, when it could easily have made a short detour through the woods and seized the horse in front? No, undoubtedly Ezra had been the victim of an over-stimulated imagination. The only wonder about his trip was, as Squire Copeland dryly expressed it, that he had not seen snakes instead of Indian devils. The story ceased to be a wonder, and became the laughing-stock of the town.

This fact did not prevent George Fields and Bill Stetson, two Corner boys, from getting a bad scare the following fall. They had gone to Letter K for the purpose of putting in a winter at gunning and trapping. They carried a generous supply of provisions with them, and took possession of the lumber camp on the banks of Bower Brook, which has already been referred to.

This they put in apple-pie order, and with a good supply of wood and a blazing fire in the middle of the

camp, they rolled themselves in their blankets that night with a feeling that they should enjoy a very pleasant winter.

Just as they were falling asleep, however, they were startled by an unearthly scream not far from the camp, followed by the sound of some heavy animal moving about in the underbush. With eager haste, they barricaded the camp door, using everything available for the purpose, and then, with blanched faces, and rifles in hand, sat upon the edge of their bunks awaiting an attack—but none came.

At intervals through the night they heard the same weird screech, coming first from one side of the little clearing, and then another. It was nearly morning before the Indian devil—for such the boys were firmly convinced it was—ceased his blood-curdling screams and withdrew into the depths of the forest. With the first rays of morning light the boys packed up their outfit and started for home, preferring to face the chaffing of their friends rather than to spend another night in close proximity to such a beast.

It was many days before the boys heard the last of their trapping expedition to Letter K. There were even some who were uncharitable enough to insinuate that their Indian devil, like that of Ezra Johnston, had its origin in whiskey, which they procured of old Pete Atkins on their way to camp.

The house of Atkins stood midway between the Corner and Letter K, and was the plague-spot of the

town. A more disreputable family it would have been hard to find. It consisted of old Pete, his wife and four boys, of whom Tom was the youngest, and was conceded to be the worst in town. There was not one of Chestnut's respectable citizens who did not heartily wish they were out of it. They kept a notorious rum-hole, and drunken orgies were an almost nightly occurrence at their home.

Several attempts had been made to close the place, but in every instance the party making the complaint had come to grief. Old Deacon Graves had his barn burned; Rev. Mr. Cross, the Methodist minister, had a fine horse so brutally stabbed and mutilated that he had been forced to shoot it; and David Clay, the chairman of the selectmen, had two valuable cows poisoned in the pasture.

Thus it came about that none of the people of the town cared to incur the enmity of the Atkins family, whom everybody believed to have been responsible for all these outrages. They were, therefore, able to carry on their nefarious business with little molestation. Many of the citizens began to fear the town would never get rid of them; but it eventually did, and Raymond Benson, as will appear, was destined to play no small part in accomplishing this result.

CHAPTER V

JOEL WEBBER'S CLOSE CALL

"Cobe Hersom's caught a bear!"

This was the startling announcement that caused a flutter of excitement among the pupils of the Corner High School as they gathered about the door early Monday morning of the third week. It was Elmer Cole who brought the news.

"Where?" asked a dozen eager voices.

"Down in Letter K. He caught it in a big steel trap he set last week. A party of the Corner folks are going down there this morning in a double team to get him. They say he's a bouncer."

"Here it comes now!" shouted Jim Farris, excitedly.

"What, the bear?" drawled Roscoe Bean, with a quizzical smile.

"No, the team. There it comes round the curve. There's Cobe and Joel Webber and—Great Scott!—if Raymond Benson and Ned Grover aren't with them. I'll bet a dollar Cobe's going to take them down there. See! Ned's got Cobe's double-barreled shot-gun and Raymond has Joel's Colt revolver. Wouldn't I like to go, though."

"Bah! I don't see much sport in that," observed Allen Webster, loftily.

"You don't see much sport in anything outside of New York," responded Elmer, impatiently.

"Well, what possible fun can there be in shooting a bear in a trap when he can't get away from you, and must stand up and take his medicine? Now if he was free, it would be quite another thing. There'd be some sport in hunting him then."

"No doubt of it."

"I shall never forget the last one I killed," added Allen.

"You killed a bear?" demanded Elmer, incredulously.

"Yes, you needn't look so surprised. It's a fact. I had a pretty close call, I can tell you. It was a monstrous one. I have the skin now in New York. We use it for a rug in our front hall."

"I thought you were something of a bear man the first time I saw you," said Roscoe Bean, dryly.

"Yes," replied Allen, delightedly, assuming the remark to be a compliment. "It doesn't take people long to discover a genuine sportsman."

"What kind of a bear was it you killed?" asked Elmer, struggling hard to keep back a laugh.

"It was a big grizzly. I was hunting with a party of friends in the Adirondacks. One day we were looking over a steep precipice. About half way down the descent we discovered a small opening that looked as

if it led into a cave. I made up my mind to investigate, so I got the fellows to lower me down the face of the cliff with a long rope, and crawled into the hole. You can just bet I was surprised when I found myself in a big cavern. Of course I began to explore it, but before I had gone three rods I found myself face to face with the biggest grizzly bear I ever saw."

"How did it get up the cliff?" asked Roscoe.

"It came into the cavern, as I found out afterwards, by a rear entrance on the other side of the mountain."

"It must have been a trying time," remarked Elmer, demurely.

"You can just bet it was. Most fellows in my place would have run."

"They would, for a fact," assented Roscoe, solemnly.

"But I made up my mind to fight," continued Allen, failing to perceive the quiet sarcasm in Roscoe's voice. "I realized that it would do no good to run, for I had untied the rope from my waist to crawl into the cavern, and I was bright enough to know that such a course would only result in my being dashed to pieces on the bottom of the ravine."

"A very wise decision, I should say, under the circumstances," remarked Elmer, with mock approval.

"Well, I thought so. The eyes of that bear looked awfully bright in the blackness of the cave, I can tell you. I knew that a failure to bring down my game with my first shot would mean death to me. You may be sure it was an anxious moment. The muzzle of my

rifle almost touched the bear when I fired. When the smoke cleared away, however, he was dead as a door-nail, shot right through the brain."

"A mighty lucky shot," said Roscoe.

"Yes. Most fellows would have felt like bragging a little over it, but that isn't my style."

"So we've observed," said Elmer, with a comic seriousness that brought an audible giggle from the members of the group.

"I was in that cave just fifteen minutes," continued Allen, with a frown, "and when I came out I had that bearskin in my hands. Perhaps the fellows weren't surprised, though. You see they hadn't heard the report of my rifle, and didn't have a suspicion of what was going on."

"You were certainly a very brave fellow, Allen," said Roscoe Bean, with studied gravity. "Still, your story is especially valuable in a school course because it illustrates the difference between a natural and a cultivated liar."

"What's that?" said Jim Farris, with a grin.

"Why, the natural liar actually believes his own yarns."

The pent-up laughter of the group found vent most heartily at this remark.

"There are some country bumpkins whom it doesn't pay to waste breath on!" growled Allen, as he walked angrily into the schoolhouse.

"I don't see what that fellow tells such outrageous

lies for," remarked Elmer Cole, when he had gone. "He must take us all for infernal idiots."

"He does," answered Roscoe, "and thinks it great sport to make us open our mouths in wonderment. The fellow shows considerable imagination, though. He would shine as a dime novel writer."

The team which had started for the bear was now opposite the schoolhouse, and Raymond and Ned came in for some good-natured chaffing.

"Be sure and stab him through the lungs."

"I'll take six pounds of steak."

"Bring me a fore quarter."

"Save me one of his tusks for a watch charm," were a few of the pleasantries shouted after them by their laughing schoolmates, as they passed from sight over the brow of the hill.

"They've given us considerable business," said Raymond.

"You must do your level best t' meet it," answered Cobe. "I've half a mind t' get Dave Webber's meat cart an' let you an' Ned peddle thet bear out."

"Perhaps Mr. Beecham will feel that he can find better business for us at the schoolhouse," responded Ned. "I don't suppose he will like our being out this forenoon very well."

"Oh, just tell him you were with me," said Joel good-naturedly. "That'll make it all right."

"We can call on Amos Dole, the town clerk, when we come back, as long as we're going right past

his house, and leave the nose and ears for bounty," remarked Ned. "It will save us two trips."

"But that won't do," said Joel, with a sly twinkle in his eye. "Cobe will have to take 'em home with him, or he can't make his wife believe he caught a bear at all."

"Why is that?"

"Well, you see he and Amos Dole went fishing down on Bower Brook not long since. Somehow they didn't have their usual good luck. They waded out across the bog to the Dead Water, but were unable to find the raft. They fished as best they could from the shore, but only managed to catch six small trout. Their feet were wet, and they were tired out and hungry, and, I suspect, somewhat out o' sorts when they started for home. They hadn't gone more than a mile before they scared up a flock of partridges. Leaving their horse hitched by the roadside, they took their shot-guns and followed them into the woods. While they were there, Dr. Lemons drove along the road. He knew their team, and reaching out of his buggy took the small string of trout from their wagon seat and drove on with them. When he got to Cobe's, he called and gave them to Mrs. Hersom, explaining to her how he came by them. You may just believe Cobe and Amos were mad when they came back to their wagon with half a dozen partridges and found those trout gone. They raved around considerably, and vowed vengeance on the thief if they ever caught him."

“ ‘Where’s your fish?’ was the first question Cobe’s wife asked him when he got home.

“ ‘Some mean skunk stole ’em from the wagon while we were after partridges,’ ses he. ‘It wouldn’t be well for him if I found him out.’

“ ‘Are you real sure you caught any fish at all?’ ses she.

“ ‘Sure,’ ses Cobe. ‘Why, Mirandy, there were forty-nine as nice trout as I ever laid my eyes on. Not a one of ’em that wouldn’t come near tipping the scales at a pound.’ ”

“Now see here, Joel,” interposed Cobe, good-naturedly, “you’re drawing that a little strong. I never said that.”

“Oh, yes you did, Cobe,” insisted Joel. “You mustn’t try to crawl out of it. I got my information pretty direct, and that was exactly what you said. He was mighty crestfallen, I can tell you, boys, when he sat down to the table and found those six little trout before him.

“ ‘What’s these?’ ses he.

“ ‘These are your forty-nine trout,’ ses Mrs. Hersom. ‘Dr. Lemons thought he’d get here a little sooner ’n you, so he fetched ’em along.’ Cobe never said a word. He ate his supper mighty mum, and then slid out of the house ’s if he’d been shot. They say he hasn’t mentioned trout since,” and Joel threw back his head and gave vent to a laugh so contagiously hearty that all the others found themselves joining in it.

"You must make allowance for what Joel tells you," said Cobe good-naturedly. "After he's spun a yarn two or three times he gets so he believes it himself."

And so the ride was continued till the old tote road, which led into the woods from the county thoroughfare, was reached.

"Where's the bear?" asked Ned, as they climbed out of the wagon.

"He's down thet road 'bout a mile, I should say," answered Cobe.

"Are you going to take the horses down there?" questioned Raymond.

"Not yet. It's 'bout all we can do t' get a team o' horses nigh a dead bear, let alone a live one. When we've done 'im up, we'll hitch onto thet drag in the wagon an' pull 'im out here."

As they went laughing and talking down the tote road the irrepressible Joel still kept up his banter.

"You never killed a bear, did you, Raymond?" he asked, solemnly.

"No, but I've heard Allen Webster tell how it's done, many a time."

"Allen Webster!" exclaimed Joel, in well-feigned surprise. "I thought he never stooped to anything less 'n mountain lions."

"Very likely he wouldn't now. That was when he first began."

"There's one or two points you must never lose sight of in bear hunting," said Joel. "When you meet

a bear—a real live bear, my boy, you must first of all be sure and—”

“What?” asked Raymond and Ned, in eager chorus.

“Keep cool,” responded Joel, with the air of a man who had just imparted a great truth.

“Of course,” said Raymond, impatiently, “but what next?”

“Well, you want to creep up to the bear softly, taking great pains not to rouse him.”

“You don’t suppose he’ll sleep much in that trap, do you?” demanded Ned.

“No, not sound sleep; probably nothing more than a troubled doze. But, as I was about to say, creep up to him softly, being careful not to disturb him. Then grab him suddenly by the tail, get half a hitch round the nearest tree, and hold him tight, while your mate ties his knife on the end of a pole and stabs him to death.”

“How many did you ever dispose of in that manner?” laughed Raymond.

“Not very many. I never was very scientific; but you see—Great Scott! What’s that?”

Joel dropped his bantering tone with this remark, and cast a startled glance in the direction of a heavy growth of firs and cedars to the right of them, from which issued a low, savage growl.

“There he is, boys,” said Cobe. “He’s awake all right.”

“No chance for Joel to creep up behind him and get

that half-hitch," said Raymond, with a rather nervous laugh. The growl had startled him considerably more than he would have cared to admit.

"Perhaps he can do it now, if he's only quick enough," remarked Ned. "Why don't you try it, Joel?"

"I'm too generous," was the response. "I really couldn't think of shutting you and Raymond out of such a chance to practice. How are we going to get him out o' there, Cobe?"

The latter question was answered by the bear itself, which suddenly emerged from the thicket, dragging the heavy log clog to which the trap was attached, and giving vent to a succession of savage growls that woke the forest echoes. The cruel teeth of the heavy steel trap had fastened themselves through one fore paw, crushing the massive bones. The animal, which was one of the largest of its species, was evidently suffering the most intense agony, and was in no mood to be trifled with.

"Look out there! Don't get too nigh 'im!" cried Cobe, warningly. "He's chuck full o' fight."

"He hasn't any show for a scrap now," coolly responded Joel, as he slipped a cartridge into his breech-loader.

"Why not?" demanded Ned.

"Why not? Because he's hung up," returned Joel.

"Just look at that clog."

Ned glanced in the direction indicated, and saw that

the heavy timber to which the trap was attached had caught between two second-growth maples, and, to all appearances, rendered it impossible for the bear to make further headway.

"I wouldn't count too much on thet," said Cobe, warningly. "I've known bears t' git out o' tighter places 'n thet. Jest let me gin 'im a pill from this Winchester. Here you! Stop—hol' on there. Where ye going?" he added hastily to Joel, who had suddenly left the group and was making toward the bear with long strides, holding his gun under his arm.

"To make the old fellow's acquaintance," was the laughing rejoinder.

"Don't ye go nigh 'im. I warn ye t' keep a safe distance—Christopher!"

The latter expression was one of alarm. In the plunging and pulling of the bear the clog had been thrown upon end and slipped between the trees. With a terrible growl of rage and pain the infuriated beast bore down upon Joel. For once in his life that worthy was thoroughly frightened, and, with white face, made a bee-line towards the tote road where Cobe and the boys were watching the scene, not daring to shoot for fear of hitting him.

"Climb a tree, Joel!" shouted Ned, excitedly, and his advice would probably have been followed had Joel been able to do so. But just as he got to the foot of the maple for which he was making, the bear was upon him, and with one terrific sweep of its paw sent him



WITH A TERRIBLE GROWL OF RAGE AND PAIN THE INFURIATED
BEAST BORE DOWN UPON JOEL.—Page 64.



spinning into the underbrush. A small, scrubby fir which stood beside the maple had broken the force of the blow, which might otherwise have proved fatal. The bear was about to punish him further when a well-directed shot from Raymond's revolver caused him to face about. It was evident that he was badly wounded, but there was still lots of fight in him. With open mouth and angry growls he made toward the group on the tote road. He had not gone far, however, when a bullet from Cobe's Winchester laid him low.

It was rather a dilapidated individual who immediately after came crawling forth on his hands and knees from the underbrush. The one blow which the bear had given him had wrought sad havoc with Joel. His hair was disheveled, his clothes badly torn, and the blood streamed over his face from several ugly scratches on the side of his cheek, whether from the claws of the bear or from the underbrush he was unable to tell. Notwithstanding his woebegone appearance, Cobe and the boys could not refrain from a hearty laugh at the sorry figure he cut.

"Yes, enjoy it, boys," said Joel, disgustedly. "I've made a big fool of myself and amused the audience. I want them to get all the fun out of the show they can. Lend me your handkerchiefs, boys, while I go to the spring and wash off the blood."

"You meant all right, Joel," said Raymond, quizzingly. "You were simply going to show Ned and me how to half-hitch that bear's tail round the maple."

"Yes, it was very clever—if you'd only been a little quicker," added Ned.

"'Peared 's if thet 'ere bear held the trump cards in thet deal," grinned Cobe.

"They seemed to be clubs," declared Raymond.

"I feel as if they came mighty near being spades," groaned Joel, as he limped away toward the spring, which bubbled up a little further down the tote road.

Excitement reigned supreme at the Corner when the party arrived home about eleven o'clock with the bear. Everybody came to look at him, and get some of the meat, which formed an important item in the bill of fare at Corner homes that noon. Joel's appearance was the subject of no end of curious conjectures, but not a word concerning him could be elicited from any of the party. It was not long, however, before Ezra Johnston, who had dropped in to view the bear as it hung from a beam over the floor in Cobe's barn, and who chanced to see the bloody knife with which it was dressed, solved the mystery. Before night the report was all over town that Raymond had been seized by the bear and would probably have been killed had not Joel gone to his assistance and stabbed the angry beast, after a most terrific struggle. The big, good-natured fellow suddenly found himself a hero in the eyes of the Corner folks, but he bore his honors meekly. In fact, his only response to the encomiums heaped upon him was a sly wink at Cobe and the boys which was more eloquent than words.

CHAPTER VI

THE TAMING OF ALLEN WEBSTER

Allen Webster was very much surprised, and secretly gratified, at the close of school that afternoon, when Roscoe Bean and Elmer Cole invited him to make a trip with them into the woods on Ezra Johnston's back lot, to hunt for partridges, and to see how the beech-nuts were coming.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and the hills were gorgeous with their autumn tintings of scarlet and russet and gold. There was a tonic in the clear, bracing atmosphere that had an exhilarating effect upon the spirits of the boys.

Allen, who was much pleased at the enthusiasm evoked by a beautiful double-barreled shot-gun which he carried—the first breech-loader of that type ever seen in Chestnut—was feeling particularly well, and could not refrain, as they walked along under the big trees, from entertaining his companions with reminiscences of a number of his alleged hunting adventures. His surroundings appeared to stimulate his vivid imagination to even greater efforts than it had ever before achieved.

Presently there was a sudden report from Elmer's

old single-barreled muzzle-loader, and a fine partridge came tumbling out of a big birch tree which stood a short distance back from the wood road.

Allen was obviously chagrined as Elmer held up his prize.

"A very good one for this section," he admitted, grudgingly. "But then, you know birds don't begin to grow as large here as they do in the Adirondacks. That was probably the reason I didn't happen to see him. I'm usually mighty quick to scent game."

"You'd probably have got this one all right if you hadn't been so busy with that story," said Roscoe, consolingly, "but go on, old man. I'm just dying to learn what became of that striped leopard after you drove him up the palm tree."

"Oh," rejoined Allen, carelessly. "I knocked him over at the first shot. His skin made a beautiful rug. We have it now in the front hall of our New York house."

"I suppose you have it alongside the other one made from the skin of that grizzly," suggested Roscoe.

"The grizzly?" repeated Allen, in uncertain tones.

"Yes. The one you shot in that mountain cave," prompted Elmer.

"Oh, yes—sure, I'd almost forgotten him," said Allen. "You see, fellows, I've knocked about so much, and had so many adventures in my hunting trips, that it's hard to keep track of them all. I recall now. It was a mighty close shave for me, I can tell you."

"What a wonderful experience you must have had!" exclaimed Roscoe, in pretended admiration.

"Yes," admitted Allen, "I flatter myself that I've seen considerable life for one of my years."

"Of course you will be only too glad of a chance to keep up your reputation here," said Elmer.

A look of alarm came into Allen's face, and he cast an apprehensive glance about him.

"To keep up my reputation here? What do you mean by that?" he demanded, weakly.

"Oh, nothing special," returned Elmer, carelessly. "I was only thinking what a fine thing it would be, now that you are along with us, if we could run onto a bear."

"A—bear?" gasped Allen, with a white face. "You—you don't suppose there were ever any bears in these woods, do you?"

"Why, certainly," said Roscoe. "I've heard father tell many a time of their coming out here, and lugging off sheep."

"Yes," added Elmer, "and you know they always thought it was bears that carried off that old gray mare of Widow Smith's."

The boys neglected to say that these events had happened more than twenty years before. It was evident that the narration of them had exerted a marked influence upon Allen Webster. He laughed nervously at the sallies of his companions, and threw uneasy glances over his shoulder.

"It would certainly be great luck for us to run onto a big man-eating bruin right here," continued Elmer, with enthusiasm. "It would not only give Allen a chance to show his splendid marksmanship, but I'll bet it would make Raymond Benson and Ned Grover stick out their eyes. It would show them that they are not the only boys in Chestnut who know how to kill bears."

"I—I don't see what we could kill one with," said Allen, faintly.

"What's the matter with that gun of yours?" demanded Roscoe.

"I haven't anything but bird-shot in it. That wouldn't amount to anything. Hadn't we—don't you think—that is to say, wouldn't it be better for us to go home and get my rifle?"

"And give the bear a chance to escape? Most certainly not," declared Roscoe, with decision. "Aren't some of those cartridges in your belt loaded with buck-shot?"

"Ye—s," admitted Allen.

"Well, what more do you want? You couldn't possibly have anything better."

"I think you'd better change over right now," said Elmer.

The boys stopped in the road, while Allen nervously removed the cartridges from his gun and replaced them with others which were loaded with buck-shot.

"Ah, here's something to the point. Evidently old Bruin has been getting in a little of his fine work in

this vicinity," cried Elmer, who was somewhat in advance of the others, as he paused by a small clump of firs.

The sight that met Allen's gaze when he reached the spot where Elmer stood made him turn pale, and his teeth chatter with fright. There, under a fir, were the mangled and half-eaten remains of a lamb.

"That was certainly a pretty thorough job," commented Roscoe.

"Ah—don't you think it's getting a little late, fellows?" asked Allen, in a low voice, as he gazed upon the sickening sight. "Really—in fact—that is, I'm sure the folks would worry about me if I shouldn't get home before dark."

"Don't get uneasy, old man," said Roscoe, heartily. "The afternoon is young yet. We'll guarantee to have you home two hours before sunset."

"Besides," added Elmer, cheerfully, "we couldn't think of having you miss such a chance to shoot a bear. The old rascal! Just look at his work!"

"But how do you know it was a bear killed that lamb?" demanded Allen. "It—it might have been a dog."

Elmer looked at Roscoe with a gleam of mirth in his eyes, and for a moment that worthy was obliged to turn away his head in order to hide a broad smile; but the face he turned towards Allen a moment later was as impassive as a tombstone.

"Dogs!" he exclaimed, disdainfully. "Who ever

heard of dogs traveling about alone in the deep woods?"

"That's so," humbly admitted Allen. "I never thought of that."

Elmer and Roscoe looked at their companion in astonishment. Never before, since they had known him, had they heard him admit that his judgment could, by any possibility, be at fault. Evidently a decided change had come over the spirit of his dreams.

"I suppose," remarked Elmer, solemnly, "that bears in this section would seem mighty small game to one of your wide experience in hunting."

"Oh, yes, very small," said Allen, slowly. "Still—you know—of course you understand that I haven't had much practice since I've been in Chestnut. Really, you mustn't depend too much upon me, now that my hand is out, as it were."

"Of course not," admitted Roscoe. "Still you mustn't expect the big game here that you have been accustomed to find in other places. I can well imagine that a fellow who has killed grizzlies in the Adirondacks would find it exceedingly tame sport to club one of our ordinary black bears to death."

"Certainly, of course, horribly tame, I can tell you. Why, the last time I was in the Black Hills—"

"The Black Hills?" interrupted Elmer.

"Certainly. That's what I said. I guess, though, I've never told you about that. I had adventures enough there to fill a pretty good-sized book. Our

party was attacked by Indians, but we managed to beat them off. Here's where I got a bad flesh wound," he added, pulling off his coat, and rolling up his shirt sleeve.

"Why," said Elmer, as he and Roscoe examined the big scar exhibited to them, "it looks something like a vaccination mark."

"Yes," admitted Allen, complacently, "it has something of that appearance; but the doctor that made it had feathers in his hair, and carried a tomahawk."

"He must have been a wild one," commented Roscoe.

"A wild one?" repeated Allen. "Well, I should remark he was. I found out afterwards that he had no less than a hundred scalps hanging about the walls of his wigwam."

"Having got the collecting craze I suppose he found it hard to reform," said Elmer. "I've got an old aunt—as good a woman as ever lived—who is just wild on the subject of old china—"

"Old china!" exclaimed Roscoe, indignantly. "What connection, I want to know, can that have with the villainous redskin who was after Friend Webster's hair?"

"Why, I simply used it by way of comparison. Don't get hot about it," expostulated Elmer.

"Oh, that's all right. I understood what you meant," interposed Allen, magnanimously. "There's no doubt that fellow wanted my topknot; but, fortunately, he didn't get it."

"It would have looked fine in his collection," said Roscoe, with enthusiasm.

"That's so," assented Elmer. "After all, you couldn't really blame him much."

The conversation had for the moment called Allen's attention from the subject of bears, and he was beginning to regain something of his old confidence and assertiveness.

"You don't mind my trying your gun, do you, Allen?" asked Roscoe.

"Certainly not," was the cordial response, as Allen handed over the weapon.

"I'm going to try for that red squirrel in the big hemlock," said Roscoe, as he took careful aim at the indicated mark.

Two sharp reports in quick succession woke the forest echoes, but the squirrel jumped nimbly to an adjoining tree, and scampered away unhurt.

"Just my luck," grumbled Roscoe, "but we can't all be as good shots as you, Allen. May I try again?"

"Why, of course," assented Allen, passing him two new cartridges. "Try it as often as you like."

Allen was apparently relieved to have his gun in other hands, and, while Roscoe slyly slipped the cartridges into his pockets, Elmer improved the opportunity to distract their companion's attention by engaging him in conversation.

"We seem to have wandered from the question," he suggested. "I believe you were about to tell us some-

thing of your experience with bears in the Black Hills."

"Bears? Oh, yes. I was going to tell you about the time Big Diamond Pete—there was a hunter for you!—well, he and I started up the Great Rocky canyon one morning before breakfast after a little fresh meat to take the place of the pork and salt codfish we'd been living on at the camp. We hadn't gone more than a mile from our layout when suddenly—huh! what's that?"

The occasion of the abrupt question was an angry growl that came from a clump of hazel bushes a little distance in front of them, and through which suddenly emerged the paws and head of a huge bear.

"Great smoke! It's a bear!" shouted Roscoe, as he beat a hasty retreat.

"Yes," gasped Elmer, as he quickly followed him, "he's a buster, too. Sail in quick, Allen, and finish him. Give him that gun, Roscoe. We'll just stand back and see how he does it."

But Allen paid no attention to either of these remarks. With the first appearance of the bear he stood for a moment as if rooted to the ground—a perfect picture of abject terror. His face was ghastly white, his teeth chattered, and his knees knocked together in a threatened collapse. But this was only for a moment. With the second growl that came from the bear he seemed to recover himself somewhat, and, turning about, he disappeared through the woods at a rate of speed which

the boys had never supposed him capable of. His hat flew off, as he leaped wildly over a windfall that lay across the wood road; but he did not stop to pick it up.

As he passed from sight a loud shout of laughter came from the bushes. A moment later they parted, and Raymond Benson stepped into view.

"This is the richest thing I ever ran up against," he gasped, as he threw upon the ground the skin of the bear he had shot in Cobe Hersom's trap that forenoon. "That wasn't half a bad idea getting Cobe to leave the head and fore paws on that skin."

But Elmer and Roscoe were rolling upon the ground in paroxysms of laughter.

"I should say, by the way he ran, that he would do well hunting rabbits," continued Raymond. "He would be reasonably sure of catching them."

"My soul! did you ever see the beat of that?" gasped Elmer.

"I never did—nor expect to again," conceded Raymond.

"He seems to have degenerated since he killed that last grizzly," added Roscoe. "But perhaps he merely went after his dirk-knife."

"I reckon he's just about joined Big Diamond Pete up the Great Rocky canyon by this time," said the laughing Elmer. "My! wasn't he nervous, though?"

"I confess, fellows, I was a trifle nervous myself," said Raymond, "until I heard that signal from Roscoe. Up to the time I heard those two shots I was worrying

for fear you might not be able to get possession of his gun. How did you manage it?"

"Just as easy as rolling off a log," rejoined Roscoe. "I simply asked him for it, and he turned it right over to me like a little man."

"We'd been talking bear to him, you see," explained Elmer, "and I think he was actually relieved to get that gun out of his hands. It sort of put the burden of the defense on Roscoe."

"I was afraid if the rattlehead kept the gun he might pull himself together long enough to shoot," said Raymond.

"You needn't have feared that," said Elmer. "We wouldn't have allowed him to get near enough to shoot at you with that gun in his hands. I don't believe he could have fired it, though, to save his life, after you gave that first growl."

"He wouldn't have carried it a yard," asserted Roscoe with conviction.

"I had hard work to keep a straight face when Roscoe hid the fresh cartridges in his coat pocket," chuckled Elmer. "I was afraid he might see it; but he was too busy telling me about his Black Hills adventures to notice it. I never saw a fellow before in my life who was so completely carried away by the absorbing power of his own lies."

"I came near shouting out loud when Elmer showed him that dead lamb under the fir trees," said Roscoe, "especially when Allen suggested that perhaps it might

have been killed by dogs. It was about the only truth he stumbled upon during the trip, and it wasn't surprising, perhaps, that he didn't recognize it."

"You bluffed him right out of it," said Elmer. "I felt fully repaid when I saw the way that carcass straightened out his hair for the part I had in lugging it over from the edge of Ezra's pasture. It was about the most odorous bundle I ever handled," he added, with a grimace.

"It was a trifle mellow, for a fact," admitted Roscoe, "but the results it brought were worth the price."

A moment later the trio started down the narrow wood road toward the Corner. As they reached the hat which Allen had left in his precipitate flight, they picked it up, and hung it in triumph on the ends of the gun-barrels.

That evening all the people in the vicinity knew of Allen's adventure, and the group at Squire Copeland's store enjoyed more than one hearty laugh at his expense. It would be impossible to describe Allen's rage and chagrin when he learned the nature of the joke that had been played upon him. For more than a week his double-barreled shot-gun, surmounted by his hat, occupied a conspicuous place in Copeland's store, before he mustered up courage enough to send for it. There was probably not money enough in Chestnut to have tempted him to go for it in person, for, like most boasters, he was keenly sensitive to ridicule. It was destined to be many a long day before

he heard the last of the episode. The lesson was a salutary one, however, and during the remainder of his stay at the Corner he was never known to indulge in any of his old-time hunting fictions.

CHAPTER VII

THE SPIRIT OF MISCHIEF

Although David Beecham had been successful as a district school-teacher, he soon found that a Free High School was quite a different thing. It was much larger; then, too, its pupils were older, and drawn from all parts of the town.

For several weeks matters went along smoothly enough. Then the trouble began. A spirit of mischief and unrest appeared to pervade the whole school. Even some of those who had been among Mr. Beecham's most staid and steady-going pupils at the district school seemed completely dominated by its influence.

A very disturbing element in the school consisted of several young men who, although they were too old to engage personally in the petty mischief so annoying to the teacher, were not above urging the smaller boys on by an apparent approval of their pranks. Among these young men was Dave Weston, the cousin of Raymond, who has already been referred to in the opening chapter. Dave was twenty years of age, and although he was personally respectful and attentive to his studies, and gave Mr. Beecham no cause to complain of his conduct, he had contrived to make him

a great deal of trouble, by setting on foot no little mischief among the smaller boys, who entertained a profound respect for his opinion.

Upon Raymond, especially, had Dave exerted an unwholesome influence by privately commending him for acts of mischief which he should have been manly enough to condemn.

"I tell you there doesn't begin to be the pluck and backbone in this school that there was a few years ago," he remarked to a crowd of the younger boys as they sat upon the steps of the schoolhouse platform one morning about half an hour before the opening of the forenoon session. "In those days no teacher would have dared to domineer round the way Beecham does now, I can tell you. It wouldn't have been healthy for him if he had. He would have been lugged outdoors mighty lively. The fellows in the school had nerve in those days. I shall never forget the winter we lugged Charles Kendrick out and dumped him in a snow-drift," and Dave laughed loudly at the amusement which the recollection appeared to afford him.

"How was that?" queried Raymond, with evident interest. "I've heard that affair referred to a number of times, but have never learned the full particulars of it."

"Yes. Let's have it," came in eager chorus from the other boys.

"Well, you see," began Dave, who only wanted this invitation to tell the story, and who was delighted to

have around him such an interested audience, "when Kendrick came here he was sort of looked upon as a last resort. He had the reputation of being a terror. The school here had the name of being about the toughest proposition in the county. Half a dozen different teachers tried their hands at it, but all of them came to grief. The people round town were awfully disgusted, and everlastingly nagged the agent. They got him terribly keyed up over it. He couldn't think of anything else, and vowed he'd find a man who could teach the school, if he had to hire a prize-fighter. After considerable correspondence he got track of Kendrick, who was recommended to be a regular steam-engine. He was a powerfully-built fellow, and had the reputation of being the best all-round athlete in his college. He had been hired at big wages to teach a number of hard schools, and had never failed to straighten them out. In fact, he had worked up a big name in that sort of business. Well, he got along here after a while. He reached the Corner on the afternoon stage from Bolton, and while he thawed himself out by the stove in Copeland's store, he proceeded to tell the people there just what he intended to do. The report that the school here was a hard one didn't frighten him a bit, he said. He should really like to see the school he couldn't teach. Of course he would probably have to dust out a dozen or two of the ringleaders before matters got settled down to a business basis, but that was to be expected. He assured them, with considerable emphasis, he'd

straighten things out, if he had to flog every mother's son of us into our beds."

"He was mighty foolish to make such talk as that," said Raymond.

"Yes; even if he thought that way, it wasn't very good policy to let people know it in that public manner," added Ned Grover.

"What sort of a looking fellow was he?" queried several of the group.

"He was about five feet, ten inches high, square-shouldered, stockily-built, and quick as a cat. He was a splendid boxer, too. In fact, if he could have kept the whole school at arm's length, I don't doubt but that he could have done all he said he could, and more. He was an athlete every inch of him. To tell the truth, we fellows were a bit afraid of him for a few weeks—that is, until we had time to sort of take his measure; then we concluded that any dog which barked as much as he did wouldn't bite deep when it came to a fight."

"How did he start in?" asked Ned.

"As pompous as Old King Cole himself. After he had called the school to order, he made us a little speech. He said he had heard the school spoken of as a hard one, and he understood that its pupils had behaved outrageously toward former teachers, but there was going to be a radical change that term. Then he showed us a heavy ruler, and a big rawhide. 'These are hard masters,' says he, 'but it depends entirely with you whether they have any work to do this term or not.'"

"What did you say to that?" asked Raymond.

"Not a word, but we kept up a considerable of a thinking. You never saw such a tyrant as that Kendrick was from the time he started in until we finally put him out. He seemed to delight in studying up new punishments for the smaller scholars, but we soon began to notice that, with all his big talk, he didn't appear anxious to have any trouble with us large fellows. Well, matters went along quietly about three weeks, but there was a storm brewing all the time, and finally it burst. All of us large boys were in the history class. We took that study on purpose so that we might all be together when we got ready to run Kendrick out. While we were reciting one day, Teddy Avery, the Widow Avery's little lame son, did something—I never knew what—that made Kendrick mad. Quicker than it takes to tell it he had the frightened little fellow by the coat-collar, and dragged him into the floor in front of the school. There he held him out at arm's length, and shook him till he was dizzy and dazed. When he finally let go of him the poor little chap fell to the floor in a dead faint. That was more than we fellows could stand. We just rose in a body from those front seats and fell upon Kendrick like a barrel of bricks. We took him completely by surprise, and he didn't have time to ward us off before we clinched with him. When we once got glued onto him he couldn't shake us off."

"Did he fight?" was the eager query from several of the boys.

"Did he fight!" repeated Dave, as if amazed at the question. "Well, I should rather say he did. We fellows never realized before what a cordy, powerful fellow he was. He made the dust fly, I can tell you. A demon couldn't have struggled more desperately. At times it almost seemed as if he'd get the upper hands of us in spite of all we could do, but we were too many for him, and finally winded him. I tell you, it was awful exciting about that time around these premises. The girls screamed and ran outdoors, while the small boys showed their hatred of Kendrick by cheering us on, and bringing us woolen comforters from the entry to tie him with. We were a pretty hard-looking crowd when we finally choked the fight out of him. All of us were covered with dust from head to foot, and not one of us had a whole suit of clothes on his back. Our hair was all ruffled up, our collars torn off, and a number of us were bleeding from scratches we had received, but we didn't mind that a bit. We had knocked Kendrick out, and were happy. We tied him hand and foot and laid him, breathless and gasping, upon the teacher's platform, about the most surprised man, I think, there ever was in the town of Chestnut."

"What did he do?" asked Raymond.

"Well, just as soon as he could get his breath he began to cry baby, like a great calf. I never saw a man come down the way he did. He promised to do entirely different in the future if we'd only let up on him; but we didn't dare to trust him. We lugged him out onto this

very platform and bounced him into a big, soft snow-drift over there at the south end of it. That wilted him completely. When we brought him back into the schoolhouse he was bawling like a great overgrown child, and begging us, in the most humble manner, to let him go."

"Did you do it?" asked Ned, with deep interest.

"No, we didn't dare to take any chances with him. We left him there, packed up our books and went home. Some of the small boys, who owned the comforters we had tied him with, let him go after we had left the schoolhouse. I can just tell you, boys, the affair kicked up an awful row, and there was terrible excitement in town—but most of you know all about that. There was no more school that term. Kendrick was horribly mortified, and left town the very next morning. He has never shown up in these parts since."

"What was done about it?" demanded Raymond.

"About what?"

"Your row with Kendrick."

"Well, the committee concluded that no live man could teach the Corner school while we fellows were in it, so they expelled every one of us who had a hand in lugging out Kendrick. I am the only one of the crowd who has ever been in this schoolhouse as a pupil since. I tell you those were live times," he continued, enthusiastically. "We had boys with blood and backbone in school then. They wouldn't have stood Beecham long, you may be certain; but things are different now."

"I don't see any similarity between that man, Kendrick, and Beecham," declared Raymond, emphatically.

"Why not?"

"Kendrick was a coward and a bully, while Beecham is a gentleman."

"Oh, of course Beecham isn't like Kendrick," assented Dave. "I never said he was. I only said our old crowd wouldn't have stood him; but that doesn't signify much. They wouldn't have stood anybody in the shape of a teacher."

"I thought you were trying to draw a comparison between the two men," said Ned.

"No, I wouldn't undertake to do that. The two men are totally different. It's lucky Beecham isn't a Kendrick, though. It would be rough on this school where there isn't blood enough to do anything but grin and bear whatever comes along."

Dave's remarks were closed by the ringing of the teacher's bell; but the manner in which he had made the disgraceful conduct of himself and his companions, in resisting their teachers, appear commendable, and even heroic, had not been without its injurious influence upon his hearers. Many of the younger boys thought that day, as they sat in the droning schoolroom, what a fine thing it would be to end the burdens of the term by tying Mr. Beecham and lugging him outdoors. Fortunately there were none among them foolhardy enough to attempt such a thing, though Dave Weston deserved no credit for the fact.

Not long after this Mr. Beecham kept Raymond after school, and had a long and serious talk with him.

"I know, Raymond," he said, earnestly, "that you have abilities which, properly exerted, will some day place you in the front rank of influential men; but you must make a better use of them than you have here. You might easily lead in your classes if you would only apply yourself to your books, but instead of that, with the exception of history, you rank low in all of them."

"There are a number lower than I, Mr. Beecham."

"That is true; but it is no recommendation for a young man to say that he is not the lowest in his classes, when, with just a fair amount of application, he might easily be first in all of them."

"I have studied considerably, Mr. Beecham."

"You have, by fits and starts, done good work. That method does not bring the best results anywhere, Raymond. It is only persistent effort that achieves the highest success. Your conduct this term has been an injury, not only to yourself, but to the whole school."

"The whole school?"

"Yes; you seem a little incredulous, but it is, nevertheless, a fact. You have a great influence over your associates, and the course you take has very much to do with the success or failure of this school. I had hoped to find in you a help and support, but almost from the beginning of this term you have been deliberately engaged in robbing your fellow pupils."

"Do you mean to charge me with stealing?"

"In the sense you mean, no; in a more important sense, yes. Many of the pupils here do not enjoy your advantages. This is the only chance a number of them have had to attend school during the whole year. It is very important that they should make the most of their opportunities. Whatever they acquire here will be of great assistance to them in the future. Now, whenever you, or any one else, distracts the attention of fellow pupils from their books, you take from them so much that would otherwise be theirs, and they go away from here, at the close of the term, so much the poorer prepared for the work of life."

"I had never thought of that," said Raymond, soberly.

"But it's so, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope you will never again rob any of your fellow pupils, Raymond. I have never asked you if you were responsible for any of the pranks that have been played this term. I knew you were too brave and manly a fellow to lie about it, and I did not want to take advantage of your truthfulness to convict you of those things. You know it is a rule of our courts that witnesses need not criminate themselves."

"I am glad you have had this talk with me, Mr. Beecham. I have behaved outrageously, but I mean to do better. I'll turn over a new leaf this very day. Here's my hand on it."

Mr. Beecham shook the proffered hand very cordially,

and started for his boarding-place with more buoyancy of spirit than he had felt for a fortnight.

Raymond was unusually silent as he and Ned Grover drove home after the gray colt that evening. His companion told himself that he was thinking up some new mischief for the morrow. In this Ned was mistaken. Raymond was very seriously making some good resolutions. Had he kept them, he would have saved himself some unpleasant experiences.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GRIEVANCE OF EZRA JOHNSTON

"Hol' on thar ye young rascallions! Stop right whar ye air!"

Uncle Ezra Johnston's voice was shrill and imperative, but Harry Oakley and Sam Brown, who were scudding across the sheep pasture in the direction of the Corner schoolhouse, paid scant attention to him.

"Oh this blamed rheumatiz!" he groaned, with his hand on his back. "It's no use talkin'. I can't run, that's sartin sure. If I was only ten years younger I'd gin them young blatherskites suthin' t' remember me by—I would, by gum!"

He hobbled painfully along only to see the objects of his wrath climb nimbly over the bunk fence, and mingle with the shouting, romping crowd of boys who were playing in the school yard. A new rough-and-tumble joke was being practiced, which, judging from the loud and boisterous laughter, appeared to furnish considerable amusement to all but the victims. The plan of operation was for one boy to engage another in conversation, while a third boy crept up and took a position on his hands and knees just behind him. A sharp push from the boy in front seldom failed to send the victim

flat upon his back with startling celerity. It was a dangerous and foolish pastime—one that might easily have crippled some boy for life. Fortunately, however, the ground in the school yard was soft and grassy, so that no serious results came of the rough sport. The victims generally took their discomfiture good-naturedly and were on hand to greet the next victim with a hearty guffaw. Naturally the boys had grown a little wary after two or three successful exhibits of this joke, a number of the smaller ones roosting with grinning expectancy on the "grand stand" to make sure of their own safety.

"This crowd's getting about as suspicious as Abe Martin's old stub-tailed dog," laughed Dave Weston, as he sidled quickly away to avoid Raymond Benson, who was stealing up behind him.

"How was that?" grinned Ned Grover.

"Why, he was so suspicious that he went through life sideways for fear some one would kick him."

"That doesn't speak very well for Abe," declared Raymond Benson.

"That's true enough," admitted Dave. "He was very much like some boys I've known."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the arrival of Sam Brown and Harry Oakley, breathless and panting.

"Hello, what's up?" demanded Dave Weston, as the boys gathered about them in a flutter of excitement.

"Ezra Johnston!" gasped Harry Oakley.

"Aha!" returned Dave, sternly. "Been drawing on his orchard, have you? It would be well to go slowly, boys. You must remember that the pasture where we play ball belongs to Uncle Ezra. He could shut us out of it 'most any time. It would be just like him to do it, too, if you get to pestering him."

"But we didn't touch his old apples," returned Harry, resentfully. "We were hunting for a ball Sam knocked over there. We'd just found it when he descended on us. You'd have thought we were a couple of horse-thieves by the way he opened up on us. He was in a frame of mind, I can tell you."

"Why didn't you explain to him?" persisted Dave.

"Explain nothing!" returned Sam Brown, disgustingly. "He wouldn't give us a chance to say boo. He was bound to do all the talking. That old cane of his was flying round his head like a flail. We thought it would be healthier for us to light out, and give him a chance to cool off."

"Here he comes now," announced one of the smaller boys in a stage whisper, and a moment later Ezra climbed slowly over the fence and hobbled across the school yard.

"Whar's them young skunks as was raidin' my orchard?" he snarled, as his bleary eyes swept over the group of boys before him.

"Are you sure that any of the boys were troubling your orchard, Mr. Johnston?" asked Dave Weston, in conciliatory tones.

"Sure, drat 'em!" grunted Ezra, wrathfully. "Didn't I ketch 'em in th' very act. Don't go for to cross-examine me, young feller; don't gin me no more o' your sass, I tell ye. I know jest what I'm talkin' erbout."

"Two of the boys went over there to find a baseball they'd lost," mildly suggested Dave; "but I haven't known of any of them troubling your apples. Most of us have plenty at home."

"All the more reason why you should let mine alone," snapped Ezra. "If the boys lost a ball why wasn't they men enough t' come and speak t' me erbout it?"

"I don't imagine they thought you'd care if they looked for it," suggested Dave.

"Wal I do. I don't want nary one o' you in my orchard 'thout my consent. I—gee whittaker!"

As this last startled ejaculation broke from Ezra's lips his heels flew in the air, and he measured his length upon the ground, impelled by a sharp push from Sam Brown, who stood just behind Dave Weston, over the back of Raymond Benson, who had sneaked up and taken a position on his hands and knees behind the unsuspecting old man during the progress of the conversation. Before Ezra could regain his feet the boys had disappeared into the schoolhouse, in answer to the bell, leaving him to rub his shins and swear vengeance.

"Now you've gone and done it," snapped Dave Weston to Raymond Benson, as they made their way through the boys' entry to the schoolroom. "There's liable to be a long tail to that kite."

This remark made Raymond feel decidedly hot and uncomfortable and he felt the blood mount to his face, and his heart beat wildly a moment later when Ezra Johnston, the picture of vindictive wrath, made his appearance in the open door of the schoolroom and glared about him a moment in silent rage.

"What sort of a school air this, anyhow?" he demanded presently, in high-pitched, angry tones.

This unexpected question was like a dash of cold water to Mr. Beecham who, always attentive to visitors, had come courteously forward to greet him and offer him a chair.

"Why—Mr. Johnston—wha—what do you mean?" he stammered in red-faced embarrassment.

"I mean air this a school for decent boys an' gals, or air it a collection o' young varminths?"

By this time Mr. Beecham had partially recovered his composure.

"They are your neighbors' children, Mr. Johnston," he returned with quiet dignity. "You should know them quite as well as I do, and I confess that I am at a loss to understand your question."

"I don't mean no disrespect t' you, Mr. Beecham," persisted Ezra, doggedly, "but I've been used scandalous—indecent."

"I'm very sorry to hear you say so. I trust none of my pupils are at fault," returned Mr. Beecham with a note of inquiry in his voice; "er—won't you have a chair?"

"If it's all the same t' ye, Mr. Beecham, I'll say thet I've got t' say right here."

Mr. Beecham nodded assent.

"A little spell ago," continued the visitor, "I ketched two of your boys 'n my orchard. I'm a little nigh-sighted, but there was no mistake erbout 'em. They was the Grover boy an' Andrew Benson's grandson. I'll swear t' thet."

Raymond sprang to his feet, his face white with anger, but Mr. Beecham, who was visibly disturbed by what he had heard, sternly motioned him to his seat.

"Go on, Mr. Johnston," he said, coolly.

"When I yelled at 'em," continued Ezra, "they lit right out. I followed 'em es well es I could; but since my rheumatiz got so bad I'm not es spry es I used t' be. When I got t' the school yard, there they was es big es Cuffy. That big feller over there"—pointing at Dave Weston—"pretended es how they was huntin' for a baseball, an' while he was a-talkin' t' me some scallawag—I couldn't see jest which one on 'em 't was—got down behind me an' th' big feller thar pushed me over 'im. Then they traipsed away inter th' schoolhouse a-snickerin' an' a-gigglin' 's if they'd done a mighty smart thing."

"I am certainly astonished, Mr. Johnston, at what you've told me," began Mr. Beecham, in apologetic tones. "I didn't suppose—er, what do you wish to say?" he asked in response to an interruption by Harry

Oakley, who had raised his hand and was vigorously snapping his fingers.

"I think I can explain this, Mr. Beecham," responded Harry, rising to his feet.

"It certainly seems to call for explanation," sternly said the teacher.

"Sam Brown was knocking flies to me over in the pasture," continued Harry. "One of them went over into Mr. Johnston's orchard and was lost in the grass. Sam and I went over there to hunt for it. Just as we found it Ez—er, Mr. Johnston—came out and ordered us off. We came away just as quick as we could."

"What did ye run so fast fur ef ye wasn't up t' mischief?" demanded Ezra, incredulously.

"Because—why—you see—"

"Because what?" interrupted Ezra, with a gleam of triumph in his small, round eyes.

"Well, you were awful mad—and—and we were afraid you wouldn't give us a chance to explain," concluded Harry.

"He was waving his cane at us all the time," explained Sam Brown.

"Stuff an' nonsense!" sniffed Ezra. "'Pears t' me ye acted mighty strange for honest boys."

"Well, those are the facts," persisted Harry, stoutly.

"You are quite sure that you didn't trouble Mr. Johnston's apples, are you?" asked Mr. Beecham.

"Certainly we didn't," protested Harry, warmly.

"You appear to have labored under a misapprehen-

sion, Mr. Johnston, so far as your orchard is concerned," said Mr. Beecham, turning to his visitor. "I have no doubt that the boys are telling the truth."

"That's right! Stan' up for 'em!" exclaimed Ezra, angrily.

"But they were only after their ball, Mr. Johnston," expostulated Mr. Beecham.

"Wal, they needn't come after any more. I want ye t' keep out o' my orchard, an' what's more out o' my sheep pastur'. If I ketch ary one o' ye thar agin I'll—I'll have the law on ye."

"One moment, Mr. Johnston!"

Raymond Benson was standing in the aisle with white, set face, and there was a ring of determination in his voice.

"Why—Mr. Benson—" began the teacher, deprecatingly.

"Excuse me, Mr. Beecham, but I think I have a right to speak," continued Raymond. "You have come here, Mr. Johnston, and, in the presence of forty witnesses, have accused me of being a thief. You know now that your accusation was false. You order the boys to keep out of your sheep pasture, which they are not hurting in the least, and you talk about having the law on them. I give you fair warning that if you attempt to drive us out of that pasture I'll sue you for slander. I'll make things interesting for you, and come mighty near owning that piece of land myself before I'm through with you."

A ripple of applause greeted this bold announcement. Ezra was nonplussed. Like all men of his class he had a wholesome fear of the law.

"I—I—thought as how ye was one on 'em," he stammered in evident confusion. "I guess I put my foot in it thar." He paused a moment, balancing himself first on one foot and then on the other. "I haint got no objections t' you boys a-playin' ball in my pastur', if ye'll jest leave my apples alone," he added weakly, and turning he hobbled away out of the room.

When he was gone Mr. Beecham improved the opportunity to have a very serious talk with his pupils. He expressed his gratification at finding Ezra's charge regarding his apples to be unfounded, but declared that whoever had tripped the old man was guilty of a mean and cowardly act, one that might have had most serious consequences. He trusted that none of those present would participate in anything of the kind again.

"You're a cool one," said Dave Weston to Raymond at recess, "but what if Ezra had known all the facts in the case, wouldn't he have called your bluff though?"

"He was so rattled over the threatened lawsuit that he clean forgot about his tumble," grinned Sam Brown.

"What Mr. Beecham said about that being a mean thing was true," responded Raymond, soberly. "I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself for the part I had in it."

"You're turning pious, are you?" said a sneering voice at his elbow. "You remind me of a cow that

gives a good mess of milk and then kicks the pail over. Pooh! I'm heartily sick of such cant."

Raymond turned angrily to meet the contemptuous face of Allen Webster.

"Ah, the great catcher has spoken!" he rejoined, sarcastically. "Listen, fellows, to the voice of Solomon."

As he turned away a sharp blow caught him on the side of the head and sent him staggering back.

"I'll give you a lesson in manners," declared Allen, following him up.

"You coward! You sneaking coward!" cried Raymond, hotly, steadying himself with an effort. "Only a cur would attack any one from behind."

He struck out with all his force, and, catching Allen under the ear, sent him sprawling to the ground—where he remained, evidently having had quite enough of the encounter. Raymond in his anger would have sprung upon him there; but Dave Weston and Sam Brown held him back.

The ringing of the bell at that moment called the boys back to the schoolroom, and Raymond, his hot, flushed face still smarting from Allen's blow, sank reluctantly into his seat. A headache that had bothered him through the morning session, but which had, apparently, passed away during the noon hour, returned with increasing severity, and he was conscious of feeling thoroughly miserable and out-of-sorts. As the afternoon droned away, he found it impossible to concentrate

his mind upon his studies. Much of the time he sat bending forward upon his desk with his head pillowed upon his arms. On several occasions Mr. David Beecham, the teacher, spoke sharply to him, directing him to pay attention to his work. It would have been better for Raymond if he had stated his condition frankly, and had been excused from further attendance for the day. Instead, he chose to regard the well-meant admonitions of the teacher as a personal affront, and became more surly and insubordinate as the long afternoon wore slowly away.

"Will you hold up your head, Raymond Benson, and pay some attention to your work, or must I try the virtue of this?"

Even the sharp, imperative tones of the teacher did not fully arouse Raymond to his surroundings. He was conscious that his name had been spoken, but so absorbed had he been in his own reflections, and so thoroughly miserable, that he did not at once comprehend the significance of Mr. Beecham's remark. Slowly raising his head, he cast a bewildered look about the room, upon whose discordant sounds a sudden hush of expectancy had fallen, and inquired in an uncertain voice:

"What, sir?"

"Will you pay some attention to your work," repeated the teacher, sternly, "or must I try the virtue of this?"

A wave of indignation mantled Raymond's cheek.

The hot blood surged to his temples, and his breath came quick and fast.

"That—that pointer?" he gasped in a voice choked with passion.

"Yes, sir, this pointer," returned the teacher, coolly. "I've reached a point with you where forbearance has ceased to be a virtue. This thing is going to stop right here and now. Either you will have some vague idea of what is going on in this schoolroom, or know the virtue of this. Now, sir, which course do you purpose to pursue?"

"Neither—don't you—don't you dare to strike at me."

There was a ring of defiance in Raymond's voice. It was evident to the excited pupils, who had dropped their books and were watching the scene with open mouths and amazed faces, that he was in a thoroughly belligerent frame of mind, and quite ready for a contest with Mr. Beecham.

His reply had been so fiery and unexpected that the teacher was quite as astonished as were his pupils.

"Do you intend to defy my authority?" he gasped.

"I don't intend to take a blow from you or any one else so long, at least, as I am able to defend myself."

Mr. Beecham's face was white, and he shook with visible excitement.

"Such conduct on your part, Benson, is, to say the least,—er—er—contumacious! What do you mean by it?"

"Just what I say," returned Raymond, doggedly.

Mr. Beecham grasped the pointer more firmly in his hand and took a step towards Raymond, then paused, irresolutely. He was but little stronger, physically, than the boy who faced him so defiantly. He saw, too, by the heavy ruler which Raymond had taken from the window-sill and was holding in his hand, that he would not be subdued without a hard struggle. Mr. Beecham did not relish the prospect of a fight. He was not a belligerent man. Besides, he had a special incentive to peace in this instance from the fact that Dave Weston, a cousin of Raymond's, and one of the largest boys in school, had risen from his seat and was standing half way down the aisle closely watching the progress of affairs, with an evident purpose to take a hand in them should they come to blows. Under the circumstances Mr. Beecham decided that diplomacy was preferable to war.

"I—I did not expect this of you, Raymond," he said, with unconcealed emotion. "Such insubordination is of course intolerable. On the whole, however, it may be best for you to leave the school."

"Very well, sir."

Mr. Beecham turned abruptly, and, going to his desk, rang the bell as a signal for dismissing the school.

Raymond lingered behind the others to strap up his books. As he reached the door Mr. Beecham turned and spoke to him.

"I confess that I am unable to understand this,

Benson," he said, sadly. "I knew you were a mischievous boy, and at times, so far at least as your studies have been concerned, an indolent one. I have never regarded you, however, as either vicious or insubordinate. I am at a loss to account for it."

"I have been feeling mean and out-of-sorts to-day, Mr. Beecham," returned Raymond, in a low voice. "My head has ached—and—and I didn't like the way you came at me. I had rather die than be whipped before the whole school," he added, passionately.

"Well, well, possibly I was a little hasty," admitted Mr. Beecham. "If your head ached, why didn't you tell me of it?"

"I thought you could see for yourself."

"Unfortunately I could not."

"Well, I'm not to blame for that."

"I think now that we understand each other better, it would be well to let this matter drop," said the teacher, in a conciliatory tone.

"Thank you, Mr. Beecham," returned Raymond, quietly. "I feel that—that I haven't done myself justice here, and that it would be best for all concerned that I go. Good-bye," he added, resolutely, and putting his books under his arm he passed out of the room.

"False pride," murmured Mr. Beecham when he had gone. "Some day he must learn to conquer it."

He arose dejectedly and left the schoolhouse, locking the door behind him.

Raymond's school days in Chestnut were over.

CHAPTER IX

AN EVENING AT SQUIRE COPELAND'S STORE

It was with mingled feelings that Raymond walked away from the Free High School after the trouble with Mr. Beecham narrated in the preceding chapter. He endeavored to convince himself that it was wholly the teacher's fault, and that he had been a much-abused boy. In this he was not altogether successful. He found it impossible to blot out the remembrance of many mischievous pranks, which had taken the attention of his fellow-pupils from their books, and rendered the work of his teacher far more trying than it would otherwise have been. In spite of his resentment he found himself wondering at the patience which Mr. Beecham had frequently shown under the most exasperating circumstances.

His anger cooled rapidly as he thought of these things. He began to feel that he had made a foolish exhibition of himself. In vain he sought to convince himself that Mr. Beecham had been harsh and dictatorial. Try as he would, the feeling remained that it was he himself who was in the wrong, and that before night the story of his disgrace would be in every one's mouth. He dreaded to think how Grandfather Benson would take it. He vividly recalled the words the old

gentleman had spoken to him at the opening of the term: "No boy who tries to do just right need ever have any trouble with his teachers." He knew that his course had often been far from right, and it sobered him to think how badly Grandfather and Grandmother Benson would feel when they learned the circumstances under which he had left school. For a moment he was almost persuaded to turn back and ask Mr. Beecham's pardon for the trouble he had given him, and seek reinstatement in his classes. His pride, however, foolishly stifled this good resolution. What would the other scholars say? Wouldn't they grin and nudge one another, and what a sissy they would think him to be! No, he wouldn't go back; that was settled.

He crossed the fields and took the bush-grown road through the woods on Ezra Johnston's back lot. A partridge flew up almost under his feet, but he paid no attention to it. Under other circumstances it would have aroused all the sportsman within him. He paused a moment before the clump of hazel bushes, from the midst of which he had been able to frighten Allen Webster half out of his wits. Ordinarily the mere thought of this episode was enough to convulse him with laughter. But to-day it appeared to have lost its power to amuse him. He wandered aimlessly along the narrow wood road, and only thought of retracing his steps when he came to the large spring that marked the dividing line between the hard-wood ridges and an extensive cedar swamp.

It was almost seven o'clock when he finally returned to the Corner. He found the team hitched in front of Squire Copeland's store, and Ned walking up and down the platform, very impatiently awaiting his arrival.

"I thought you were never coming," was his greeting to Raymond.

"Why didn't you go home without me?"

"Well, I should have, if you hadn't come about when you did."

"What did the boys and girls say about my trouble with Beecham?" asked Raymond, anxiously.

"Well, to tell you the plain truth, old man," replied Ned, slowly, "the prevailing idea appeared to be that you were in the wrong."

"Did they think it was my place to take a flogging simply for holding my head down when it ached?" exclaimed Raymond, indignantly.

"No, but Beecham only asked you to hold it up, they say, and if you had told him it ached the first time he spoke to you, he would have excused you entirely. Of course, old fellow, I'm only speaking for the majority of them," added Ned, apologetically, as if he feared that Raymond might doubt his loyalty.

"I understand that, Ned," said Raymond, gratefully. "A fellow can appreciate such a friend as you. I guess I'll not go home with you to-night. I'll stop with Uncle Weston. You can call at our place and let them know about it. Dave is going to Bolton with a load of potatoes to-morrow morning, and I can ride

home with him. Please don't say anything to the folks about this school affair."

"All right, I won't say a word."

When Ned had disappeared over the hill that sloped in the direction of Bolton from the little stretch of tableland upon which the Corner was located Raymond turned into Squire Copeland's store.

It was still a little early for the "Corner congress" which held its nightly sessions about the big Franklin stove. Squire Copeland himself had been drawn upon the jury, and was in attendance upon court at Bolton. His son, Ben Copeland, was in charge of the store, and greeted Raymond with a cordiality that did much to dispel his gloomy thoughts.

"How are you, old fellow?" he said, cheerfully.

"Oh, I'm able to be about yet."

"I guess that's more than Beecham could say if you'd dropped on him this afternoon. I tell you that kicked up quite a commotion. It's been the talk of the store ever since school let out."

"What did people say about it?"

"Well, they seemed somewhat divided. Part of them thought Beecham was too rough on you, and others thought he ought to have given you a good flogging early in the term. I rather thought the sentiment was pretty generally in your favor, though. I told them that Dave Beecham would have bid off a bigger contract than he could fill if he'd undertaken to thrash you with that pointer."

"I'm much obliged to you, Ben. Still, I don't mind telling you that I'm mighty sorry the trouble occurred. Mr. Beecham is a gentleman, and would have excused me if I had told him about my headache. Are you all alone to-night?"

"Yes, and rushed to death, too. Jim Farris was coming in to tend post-office for me, but he got word just before supper that his aunt at Bodge Mills was very sick, and he and his mother have driven over there."

"I'll tend it for you."

"Well, I'd like to have you first-rate, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"Not a bit. I'd like to do it."

"Very well, go in behind there. The letters and papers are in those alphabetical pigeonholes. The boxes are all labeled on the inside. It won't take you long to get the hang of them."

"All right, don't tell any one I'm here. Let them find it out for themselves," answered Raymond, as he passed around the counter.

From his position behind the boxes he was able to hear what was said in the store without being seen. For half an hour business was quiet. After that it grew brisk, and soon a good-sized group was gathered about the roaring Franklin stove that stood in the center of the store. A very little of its heat was sufficient to thaw out the various members of the assemblage, and politics, the crops, religion and various other topics

were casually touched upon, eliciting a varied range of opinion. Then followed a very earnest discussion upon the relative merits of certain pugilists, in the course of which Joel Webber changed the subject somewhat abruptly, remarking that the Corner was developing a young man who would "whip the whole of 'em in time."

"Who is that?" demanded several of the group in chorus.

"Young Raymond Benson. They say he and Mr. Beecham had quite a set-to this afternoon. I guess if the teacher had pressed matters much further, there'd have been a good-sized row. Blamed if I don't believe the boy could lay him out in a hand-to-hand tussle. He's a wiry young fellow, and quicker 'n a cat."

"I tell ye thet boy has had a pesky bad influence round here," interposed Ezra Johnston. "He's a bad un, an' all o' the others air willing t' follow his lead inter any kind o' mischief. I hope he'll go home now an' stay there."

"I guess you're thinking, Ezra, of the call-down he gave you on that apple business," said Joel Webber, with a sly wink at the rest of the group.

A loud laugh followed this remark, to Ezra's very evident discomfiture.

"Well, no decent boy would a made sech talk t' a man o' my years," he growled.

"You're right, Ezra," said Simon Dart. "The young men of to-day are altogether too forward.

They don't know their place. If that boy was mine I'd give him a good sound thrashing that he'd remember for one long day."

"Perhaps you would, and then again it's possible you wouldn't," muttered Raymond to himself in his retreat behind the post-office boxes.

If there was any man about the Corner most heartily disliked by the boys of the place it was Simon Dart. He kept the only store in town besides that of Squire Copeland. His stock was a most miscellaneous mixture, and he had the reputation of giving astonishingly good bargains—a merit that went a long way with Corner people, otherwise his trade would not have been a very extensive one. Simon was not a very prepossessing person. He was tall, lank and bony. His lips were thin, and he spoke with a sharp twang that always carried with it the effect of a whine. He lived alone. It was said that he was married once, but that his wife lost no time separating from him when she had had opportunity to become fully acquainted with him. There were also rumors that he had been engaged in some rather shady transactions, but there was no proof of this. The report had probably grown out of certain business dealings of his which left a bad odor, and a strange intimacy which appeared to exist between him and old Pete Atkins. Whatever the truth may have been regarding these rumors, it was unquestionably a fact that Simon had few friends at the Corner, especially among the rising generation.

Raymond heard his response to Ezra Johnston with a strong impulse to come out from behind the counter and take him by the throat. He did not blame Ezra. He had taken advantage of circumstances to thoroughly frighten the old fellow, and was not surprised to find that he still felt sore over it. Simon's remarks, however, appeared to him entirely gratuitous and uncalled for.

"I'm rather inclined to think, my good man, that you would more than have your hands full if you undertook that job," said Joel, with a warmth that told Raymond that he had at least one friend in the group about the stove. It was evident that the big fellow had not forgotten the good turn the boy had done him by helping dispose of Cobe Hersom's bear. Simon made no reply to this remark, but taking the articles which Ben had procured for him, and which had occasioned his visit to Squire Copeland's, left the store. When he was gone, the conversation was resumed by Amos Dole.

"I tell ye young Benson isn't the worst boy in the town, by any means," he said. "I know he's mischievous, an' considerable of a practical joker. But he doesn't drink or smoke or swear, an' nobody ever knew 'im t' lie. Mr. Beecham told me himself, not more 'n a week ago, that he'd never known a more truthful boy. No matter what mischief was goin' on, he was always sure that if he could get anything at all from young Benson it would be the truth. He could never get a

word out o' 'im, however, that would betray one o' his companions."

"That's it, exactly," said Joel. "When any pranks were played Raymond would own up to his part in them every time. He carried all his sins on his own shirt-front. The other boys haven't been as scrupulous. The result has been that Raymond has had to stand the blame for pretty much all the mischief that's gone on about the High School this fall. I don't think he's had a fair show—I swow I don't."

"There's probably some truth 'n what ye say, Joel," remarked Deacon Graves, who had hitherto been a silent listener to the conversation. "The boy undoubtedly has good habits. It is probable, too, that he's bin suspected o' full es much mischief es he's bin consarned in, but for all thet, he hasn't begun t' get his just deserts. The worst fault I find with Mr. Beecham is thet he's altogether too easy. He should hev kep' a firmer hand. It would hev bin a wholesome lesson for young Benson if he'd gi'n 'im a good trouncin'."

These words made Raymond wince. Deacon Graves was one of the most respected citizens of the Corner, a man of stern mould, old-fashioned and rigid in his views of life, but of sterling character. Raymond felt that he had spoken with some truth, and even the rejoinder of David Clay did not altogether reassure him.

"You're partly right, Uncle Graves," said the select-man, slowly. "Still we mustn't forget that boys 'll be

boys. I recollect that my grandfather used to say years ago es how he'd rather have a bad boy than no boy at all."

"He was wrong 'bout thet," declared the deacon, with conviction. "T' my mind a bad boy 's a pesky sight wus 'n no boy."

"Good boys are gittin' t' be powerful source 'n this 'ere town," chimed in a lugubrious voice which Raymond recognized as that of Dean Perrin, who owned a farm near his grandfather's. "I tell ye ole Pete Atkins is a curse t' this place. He 's ruined lots o' young men. If he keeps on, there'll come a time when we sha'n't have any good ones left, an' it 'll be mighty hard rubbing for us ole fellers t' keep the wolf from the door, an' git a little money t' pay our taxes."

"You'd be a happy man, Dean, if it were not for the fear of want and taxes," laughed Joel. "It's amusing in a rich man like you, when every one knows you've got mortgages, and government bonds, and railroad stocks hid away that the assessors have never been able to get hold of. To be sure, it's all clear gain for you, but it comes out of the town and makes it harder for us poor fellows whose property all has to come in for assessment."

"It's a lie!" retorted Dean, hotly. "I don't own any bonds, or mortgages, or railroad stocks. I haven't got but plaguy little, anyway, an' all thet's taxed t' death."

"There, don't get sweaty under the collar," said Joel,

in a conciliatory tone. "Didn't you know I was only joking?"

"A man who would joke 'bout taxes would whistle at his grandmother's funeral."

"You're too sensitive on the subject, that's all; but we'll drop it. I agree with you about old Pete Atkins. The town ought to get rid of him; still, I don't know many people hereabouts that wouldn't rather have his good will than his ill will. Uncle Graves and Mr. Clay can bear testimony to that."

"I don't make any charges," said the selectman.

"Neither do I," added the deacon.

"Of course you don't," rejoined Joel, "but every one knows you have your suspicions. I have serious doubts, though, whether either of you would feel any worse than the rest of us if old Pete Atkins were to leave town."

"He'll never go until there's suthin' like a pullin' t'gether among the citizens," said the deacon, bitterly.

"One or two men can't rid the place on 'im."

"Hello!" said Mr. Clay. "Here it is nine o'clock. Where on earth has this evenin' gone to?"

"Charge it up to Squire Copeland's Corner Debating Club," answered Joel. "By the way, where are Cobe Hersom and Bill Gleason?"

"They're on a hunting trip t' Letter K," replied the deacon. "I suspect they're arter thet catamount," he added; but the well-worn joke failed to awaken any response. One by one the group called for their mail,

which, at a sign from Raymond, was handed out by Ben, and took their departure. Soon the two boys were left alone in the store.

"Well, how did you make it?" was Ben's query, as he pulled down the curtains preparatory to locking up.

"Oh, first-rate. I found the mail all right when it was called for."

"Did many people recognize you?"

"Yes, quite a number did, but none of those in that crowd about the stove. Deacon Graves and Sime Dart called for their mail when they first came in, but I was satisfied from their conversation later on that both of them took me for Jim Farris."

"Where are you going?" demanded Ben, as Raymond began to pull on his overcoat.

"Down to Uncle Weston's."

"No, you're not. You're going to stop with us. Your cousin Dave will call at the store to-morrow to take some things to Bolton for us. You can go home from here with him. It would be foolish for you to think of walking clear out to the Weston farm to-night."

It did not need much urging to persuade Raymond to accept Ben's invitation, and a little later he was sleeping peacefully in the folds of one of Mother Copeland's finest feather beds, oblivious of the day and its excitements.

CHAPTER X

RAYMOND SHOOTS PETE ATKINS'S DOG

"I tell you, Raymond, if Beecham had hit you, I should have taken a hand in the scrimmage myself."

It was Dave Weston who spoke. The two boys were on their way from the Corner with a double-team load of potatoes which Mr. Weston was sending to market at Bolton.

"I knew you would, Dave," was Raymond's response to this declaration of loyalty, "but I'm glad you didn't. I'm sorry the trouble occurred. I haven't done the right thing this term. Do you suppose grandfather and grandmother know of it?"

"Yes, father was there last evening and they'd heard the whole story."

"What did they say?"

"He said they hardly mentioned the matter, but he thought they felt worse about it than they cared to show."

And then the conversation changed. Dave told his cousin, with evident elation, how it had been decided that he was to leave in November to attend Krampton Academy.

"I've gone about as far as I can here," he said,

"and I shall have lots of advantages there I couldn't get in any other way."

"I wish I was going with you," said Raymond.

"I wish you were. Don't you suppose your Grandfather Benson would let you?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid he won't want to trust me away from home after what happened yesterday."

"Oh, well, I don't believe that will make any difference with him, when he knows all the circumstances."

When the boys drove into his yard Grandfather Benson was standing in the door of the little red horse-stable that faced the road from the rear of the ell. He was a man who bore the burden of his years lightly. Although nearly seventy years of age, his eye was still bright and his step vigorous. He was of average height, a broad-shouldered, square-chested man, who, in his day, had ranked among the most powerful in the town. His face was always smoothly shaven, and the practise gave an almost boyish look to his round, full countenance. The square mouth and firm chin, however, betokened more than ordinary decision and strength of character. Grandfather Benson's eyes were blue, and always carried a bright, cheerful expression that gave the effect of a smile to his features. Everybody knew what a generous heart he had, and there was not a needy person in town who had not, at some time, been kindly remembered by him.

"Hello!" he cried, coming forward as the boys drew

up in front of the kitchen door, "I'm glad to see you. I was just thinking of harnessing up and going to the Corner. Mother was beginning to get a little worried about you."

"Didn't Ned tell her I was going to stop over?" asked Raymond.

"He may have stopped here, but we were at Bolton yesterday afternoon. I told her you were probably at your Uncle Weston's."

"I'm glad to see you back, dear," said Grandmother Benson, a white-haired, sweet-faced little woman, as she met him at the door. "I was almost afraid we had lost you."

Raymond noted a little tremor in her voice, and, as she kissed him, he thought he saw a tear glisten for a moment in her eye, but she brushed it resolutely away.

"Have you any errands for me in Bolton?" asked Dave, as he paused a little awkwardly on the threshold.

"I don't think of any," answered Mrs. Benson. "I wish, though, you'd stop here on your way home. I've some things I should like to send your mother."

"All right," responded Dave, and a moment later he was out of sight over the brow of the hill.

"Have you anything for me to do to-day, Grandfather?" asked Raymond.

"Not to-day. You need a little vacation," was the kindly response. "To-morrow I am going to begin blasting those rocks in the front field. It's the only place on the whole farm where I can't run a mowing-

machine, and, as luck will have it, comes right on the road-front. The farm doesn't show at first sight for anything near what it is worth. I'm going to have two or three of the boys about here help me to-morrow. So you had better take a day off and go hunting or fishing. I scared up a partridge on the birch ridge the other day. It's my opinion there's a flock of them somewhere round there."

Raymond went to his room and was soon dressing himself in the strong suit and cowhide boots which he kept exclusively for hunting and fishing trips. It was a room after his own heart. Raymond called it his "den." It looked down upon the brook, and through the open windows he could hear the rippling waters on summer nights. In one corner was a long cabinet filled with birds of nearly all the native varieties. They had been shot and mounted by Raymond himself, who was a taxidermist of no mean ability. Over one window hung a fine Winchester rifle, and over the other a beautiful double-barreled shot-gun. Above these were several handsome jointed fishing-rods in neat canvas cases. On the wall at the head of the bed two snow-shoes were crossed, a leather game-bag serving as a centerpiece. From this was suspended an embossed leather sheath, containing a beautiful hunting-knife, which Raymond always took with him on his sporting trips. The two bottom drawers in the large old-fashioned bureau were filled with a fine collection of steel traps of various sizes, and many a

pelt had their owner secured by means of them. On the wall at the foot of his bed was the lifelike head of the buck he had shot on his hunting trip to Letter K. These were only a few of the treasures that the den contained. No expense had been spared to make Raymond happy and contented during his stay with his grandparents, and scarcely a month passed that he did not receive some new, substantial token of loving remembrance from his family at Bangor.

"I've been used a good deal better than I deserve," he muttered to himself as, shot-gun in hand, he tramped along the birch ridge on Grandfather Benson's wood-lot about half an hour later. "Now most fellows would have got a pretty thorough dressing down, coming home under such circumstances as I did. If I live I'll show them that I mean to turn over a new leaf. I'll—"

Raymond's meditations were cut short by the sharp whir of a partridge which flew up almost under his feet. In a moment his gun was at his shoulder, and a well-directed shot brought the bird to the ground. Hardly had he stowed it away in his game-bag before he was startled by the report of a gun near him, and a moment later Ned Grover came in sight from the opposite side of the ridge.

"Hello, Raymond," he shouted, "glad to see you. I thought that first shot must have come from you. What did you get?"

Raymond exhibited the partridge.

"That's a beauty!" exclaimed Ned, "and shot through the head, too. Did you take it on the wing?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's what I call a rattling good shot. See here, old fellow, did you bring any dinner? It's nearly one o'clock, and I expected to be home by noon."

"So did I. This partridge is the only thing I have in the eatable line."

"Well, I have five more. Let's build a fire and roast a couple for dinner; then we can put in as much of the afternoon here as we want to."

Raymond readily assented to this, and soon two partridges were sizzling on the spits in front of a blazing camp-fire, while the boys, stretched out on a soft bed of boughs, indulged in reminiscences of former hunting trips.

In a short time the partridges were done, and although the boys had no salt with which to season them, they nevertheless ate them with a hearty relish, and voted them a dinner fit for a king. After the repast was over they resumed their hunting, and when they parted on the county road at dusk, about a mile from Mr. Benson's, each had a well-filled game-bag.

The darkness settled down rapidly, but a myriad of stars lit up the night. It would have made little difference to Raymond, however, if there had been none. He was thoroughly familiar with every inch of the road, and could have found his way over it on the blackest night. Absorbed in his own thoughts, he

walked briskly along, entirely oblivious of his surroundings. As he neared the long hill that hid from view the smaller one beyond, upon which stood Grandfather Benson's house, he was aroused from his reflections by the rumble of a heavy farm wagon ascending the opposite slope.

"Somebody with a late start from the Corner," he thought, continuing briskly on his way. A few moments later, as he came upon the brow of the hill, he was brought to a sudden standstill by a low growl, and found a large English mastiff blocking his path. Raymond stepped to one side and attempted to pass him, when, with a sudden jump, the dog buried his sharp teeth in his boot-leg. Nothing but the heavy leather and the thick folds of his hunting trousers saved him from a badly mangled leg. With a startled cry he vainly endeavored to shake off the savage brute, which clung to him tenaciously. The impulse of fear was succeeded by one of anger. Quickly swinging his gun from his shoulder, he placed the muzzle in the brute's ear and pulled the trigger. A sharp yelp followed the report, and the dog rolled over in the road, dead.

By this time the heavy team had arrived upon the scene. A tall man stood up in it, waving a long whip in his hand.

"Whoa, there! What in thunder d' ye think you're shooting at?" demanded a deep voice angrily, as the horses came to a standstill.

"That's my business," responded Raymond, hotly. "Whose dog was that?"

"I reckon thet's my business," responded the man, surlily. "What on it?"

"Oh, nothing," retorted Raymond, sarcastically. "Only I don't care to serve as a bone for him. It might have been healthier for him to have bitten some one else."

"D' ye mean t' tell me thet he bit ye?" demanded the man, incredulously.

"That's just what he did."

"You—you lie, you young whelp!" roared the man, in a voice hoarse with passion. "Thet dog 's clever 's a lamb; never bit any one in his life. What did ye want t' go a pesterin' on 'im for, ye spindle-shanked idiot?"

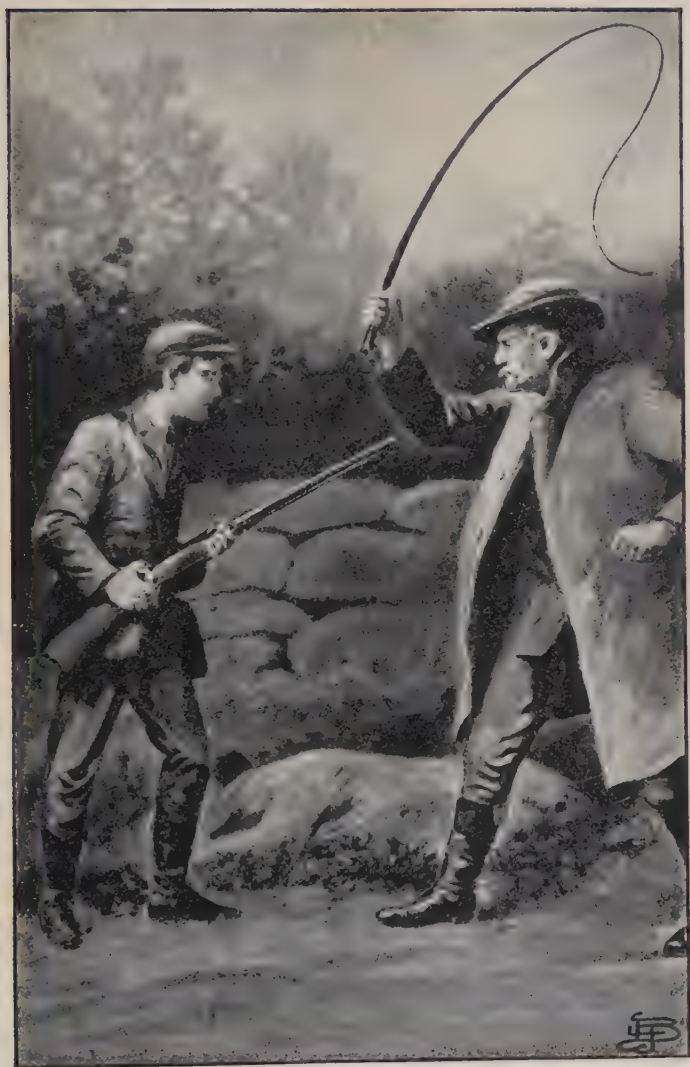
"I didn't trouble him," responded Raymond, with spirit. "The first I saw of him he jumped out and grabbed me by the leg."

"A likely story!" sneered the man. "Ye can't stuff me, you young upstart. Where did thet dog go?" he added, with a loud whistle. "Here, Bruno! Bruno! Come here, yer ole rascal!"

"I don't think he'll answer you," said Raymond, coolly.

"He won't?" cried the man, sharply. "What d' ye mean, ye scallawag? If you've troubled thet dog I'll—I'll take the price o' 'im out o' your hide."

He jumped from the wagon, and, with a muttered



“WHAT—WHAT ARE YE UP TO?” HE DEMANDED, IN STARTLED TONES.—*Page 125.*

oath, strode excitedly forward, whip in hand. Raymond saw, with dismay, that it was old Pete Atkins. It was evident that the recognition was mutual.

"Andrew Benson's cub, I'll be bound!" exclaimed Pete. "I might a knowed as much. It's 'bout time, ye young city dude, thet a little hoss-sense was knocked into ye. Mebbe you'll wear a smaller-sized hat when I git through with ye. Now, once for all, jest what did ye do t' thet dog?"

"I killed him."

"You—you killed 'im?" cried Pete, incredulously.

"Certainly—what did you think I fired for?"

"I s'picioned ye was a tryin' t' scare 'im. I didn't s'pose there was a boy in this town as would dare t' shoot 'im, an' I guess there isn't another one with sech a crust as you've got. A man could get richer 'n mud by buyin' ye for what you're really worth an' sellin' ye for what ye think you're worth. I'm goin' t' gin ye one lesson you'll remember. I reckon as how you'll wear a good deal smaller hat ter-morrow."

The long whip-lash swung through the air, and the snapper brought up near Raymond's face with a crack like a pistol-shot. Pete was about to follow up the cut with one more effective when he was brought to a sudden stop by the ominous click of a gun-hammer.

"What—what are ye up to?" he demanded, in startled tones.

"If you hit me with that whip I am going to shoot you," replied Raymond, calmly. His tones were low

and even; but through them breathed an intensity of passion that had a sobering effect upon old Pete. He felt instinctively that the boy's threat was not an idle one.

"You—you upstart!" he sputtered, with baffled rage, "would ye murder me?"

"No," said Raymond, sharply, "and I don't intend to let you murder me—not if I know myself, and my powder keeps dry."

"You'll live t' rue this, you young bantam," blustered Pete.

"Perhaps," returned Raymond, with exasperating coolness. "I've no doubt you'd like to use your brute strength to my injury, if you couldn't find some even more cowardly way of reaching me; but to-night I want you to bear in mind that the fellow who invented this gun made me just as good a man as you."

"You—you—yellow pup!" stuttered Pete, his face livid with passion.

"You swaggering old bully—you blustering old thief!" retorted Raymond, with spirit.

"Don't ye dare call me a thief," stormed Pete.

"And don't you dare call me a pup," added Raymond.

Pete glared at him a moment in impotent rage; then, turning away abruptly to his wagon, climbed sullenly upon the seat.

"You probably expect t' inherit this 'ere town an' its people from your grandfather," he sneered bitterly

as he gathered up his reins, "but I reckon you'll learn before ye die thet it pays t' keep a civil tongue in your head."

"It's a lesson you don't seem to have learned yet," responded Raymond, with vigor.

Pete made no reply, but, striking his horses savagely with the whip, continued on down the hill.

"It was mighty lucky for me that the old fellow didn't know that neither barrel of this gun was loaded," reflected Raymond, as he continued on his way home. "I used my last charge on that dog. I flatter myself that I played a very handsome bluff on Peter. I don't know just what I should have done if he had called me. Guess I could have hit him one or two wipes with my gun-stock. I didn't like the old fellow's tone when he made that last threat. He meant mischief all right. If I should catch him prowling around our place I—well, it wouldn't be healthy for him, that's all," and Raymond patted his gun significantly to give emphasis to his thoughts. "I guess I won't say anything about this to the folks," he mused. "It would only give them needless worry."

"You are rather late, but I've kept your supper warm for you," said Grandmother Benson, as she met him a little later at the kitchen door. "There have been so many accidents in the woods this fall that I was a little worried about you. What luck did you have? Why, that is splendid, I'm sure. We certainly sha'n't want for a good dinner to-morrow," she declared, as

Raymond displayed the contents of his well-filled game-bag.

Raymond ate his supper in silence, and then followed his grandmother into the old-fashioned room where Grandfather Benson sat before the roaring open fire, with the well-worn family Bible in his hands, preparatory to conducting evening prayers, as had been his custom for many years. He had never permitted anything to interfere with this, and all who had lived beneath his roof had recognized it as a regular feature of the household life. To-night, in his quiet, earnest voice, he read the story of the prodigal son. Then, closing the Holy Book, he offered up a simple, but fervent prayer that all who had wandered astray might come back again to the bountiful forgiveness of their Father's home. It always seemed to Raymond that no other man's prayers were like Grandfather Benson's—so simple, so earnest, so heartfelt. To-night he was conscious that his grandfather had him in mind, both in his reading and his petition. For a time after the service he sat in thoughtful silence, then asked abruptly:

"Why is it that neither you nor grandmother have said a word to me about my trouble at the High School?"

"We thought it best not to, my boy. Some lessons are better learned without a teacher. The school of experience has graduated some of the finest scholars in the world."

"I think I catch your meaning," answered Raymond,

gratefully. "I know I acted disgracefully, but I am determined to turn over a new leaf."

"That's a good resolution, my boy. I hope you will stick to it," responded Mr. Benson, and from that time the subject was never alluded to again in Raymond's presence by either him or his wife.

"Did ever a fellow have such a good home as mine?" thought Raymond, as he lay in his bed that night. "Grandfather and grandmother have faith in me, and I will be man enough hereafter not to abuse their confidence."

CHAPTER XI

DUD HAS A VISITATION FROM BURGLARS

For a few days after he had left the High School Raymond was busily engaged in work about the farm. Grandfather Benson had Byer Ames and Dudley Rich, two neighbors' sons, to assist him in blowing up the large rocks in the front field. Raymond and he had about all they could do to haul away the pieces with the drag and the span of heavy farm horses.

The work was not without its pleasures. Byer was a dry fellow, and his droll sayings were a constant source of amusement. Many of them were directed at Dudley, or, as he was familiarly called, "Dud," who bore them with the utmost good-nature. He was a great, strapping fellow, fully six feet in height, and weighing over two hundred pounds. Although Dud had muscles that would have done credit to a Hercules, and fists that could have knocked down an ox, he was, nevertheless, as timid as a child. He rarely ventured far from home alone after dark, and was constantly fearing a visitation from burglars, though he was unable to say what they could expect to find among his possessions to pay them for such trouble.

Raymond remembered, with a twinge of remorse,

how he had frightened the big fellow half out of his wits during the Indian devil scare, by jumping out at him after dark from the alder bushes beside the brook. He had never known how fast Dud could run when he was doing his very best. That night he had been forced to sleep with the victim of his joke, who was in a perfect tremor of terror. When Raymond saw how much he really suffered, his conscience smote him, and he made a vow never again to amuse himself by playing upon another's fears. It was a good resolution, but it must be said, with regret, that it had not always been scrupulously kept.

One night, when the front field was nearly cleared of its boulders, Raymond returned from Cobe Hersom's shop at the Corner, where he had been to have some drills sharpened, and found the boys missing.

"Where are Byer and Dud?" he asked of Grandmother Benson.

"Ned Grover came here, and they all went down to your log camp in the cedar swamp more than an hour ago," was the response.

"Did they have any guns with them?"

"No, I guess they just went down there for a chat."

Raymond lost no time in putting his horse into the stable. Then, after a hasty supper, he followed the boys to the swamp. Creeping carefully along, he took a position in the brush-pile just behind the camp. He could hear the boys within engaged in earnest conversation.

"I tell you, Dud, that whole thing was a fake," insisted a voice which Raymond recognized as Ned's. "Old man Johnston was just far enough over the bay that night to see anything, from panthers to porcupines."

"Well, take it right home to yourself, Ned," responded Dud. "If an Injun devil should follow you five or six miles through the woods, don't you believe you would know it, and even if you had been drinking a little, don't you think it would sober you?"

"Well, I never saw any animal of that kind in this country, and I've ranged the woods about as much as any fellow of my age. I don't believe any sober man ever saw one."

"Don't you believe there is such an animal?" asked Dud, incredulously.

"Certainly there is, but not so far east as this. Indeed, I doubt if many ever get further east than New York state."

"I guess you're wrong there," said Byer.

"I don't think I am."

"Well, I never took any stock in Ezra Johnston's yarns, but still I think there are catamounts right in this very county."

"Did you ever see one here?"

"No."

"Well, I've never seen a man that has."

"But I have," insisted Byer. "I have met men that had not only seen them, but killed them. There

are too many records of that, Ned, to be laughed or sneered away."

"Of course there are," said Dud. "I don't doubt but that there are, at least, half a dozen Injun devils in this town to-day; perhaps there may be one in this very swamp."

"I guess all the Indian devils we ever had departed with the noble redmen," laughed Ned.

At this point Raymond began to sniff the air and give vent to low growls, at the same time scratching about vigorously in the underbrush.

Exclamations of surprise came from within the camp.

"What's that?" demanded Dud, in a quaking voice.

"I guess it's a lynx," replied Ned. "They and the foxes have been pretty plenty in this swamp since father hauled the body of the old bay horse down below here. I'm going to set some traps around him to-morrow."

"Yes, I guess Ned's right," added Byer, but Raymond knew from the tone of his voice that he perceived the joke, and was merely playing a part.

"I never knew a lynx to act like that," said Dud, tremulously. "You don't suppose it's an Injun devil, do you?"

"Indian fiddlesticks!" replied Ned, impatiently. "You haven't the sand of a mouse, Dud."

"He may not be so much out of the way as you imagine," interposed Byer, solemnly. "That's certainly a larger animal than a lynx."

"By gracious! I won't sit 'side of this door any longer!" exclaimed Dud, in terrified accents, as Raymond gave a growl that was louder and fiercer than any of the others.

Heavy footsteps across the camp told Raymond that the big fellow had retreated to the further end of it. This move called forth a hearty laugh from his companions. The growl which had so terrified Dud had revealed to Ned the joke that was being played.

"You're right, Byer," he said. "That animal is certainly larger than a lynx. We had better take this axe and crowbar and close in on him. Dud, you can go ahead with the lantern."

"Not much," interposed the big fellow, vigorously. "I won't stir a step outside this camp."

"Very well," said Ned, as he walked toward the door. "You stand by the opening, Byer, with the axe, and I will swing the door back. You must be quick and knock it over when it comes in, or it might get by us and tackle Dud."

"You sha'n't open that door," said Dud, with decision, and the boys saw that it was useless to argue with him.

"All right," responded Byer, in a tone of resignation. "I don't see but that we'll have to camp here all night."

"All right, if we must, but you just bet we won't take any chances with a wild varmint."

At this moment Raymond approached the camp and pounded vigorously on the door.

"Come, open up there, you fellows!" he shouted.

Ned hastened to lift the latch.

"How are you, boys?" was Raymond's salutation as he entered the camp.

"Well, we had given up all hopes of seeing you here to-night," responded Byer.

"Did you see anything of a wild animal round the camp when you came along?" asked Ned.

"Not a thing."

"Well, Dud thinks it was an Indian devil. It kicked up considerable racket round here."

"Perhaps Raymond can tell us something about it," said Dud, looking at him suspiciously.

"I certainly have seen no wild animal about here, to-night," said Raymond, with such an honest air of surprise that Dud mentally acquitted him of any connection with the matter, and concluded that a genuine catamount had paid a visit to the camp.

Byer and Raymond slept together in the latter's room, while Dud occupied a small room upon the opposite side of the house. So terrified had he been by his visit to the camp, that he begged Ned to stay with him all night, and the latter, at a nod from Raymond, consented to do so.

About one o'clock in the morning, Dud, whose sleep had been disturbed by dreams of Indian devils, was awakened by somebody moving about in his room. Straightening up in bed, and rubbing his eyes to assure himself that he was really awake, he was amazed

to see, by the light of a dark lantern which they carried, two masked men busily engaged in ransacking his possessions. The window was open, and the top of a ladder protruding through it showed how they had gained an entrance to the room. Both men were roughly dressed and wore black cambric masks. The sight of them was terrifying to Dud, who felt the cold sweat start from every pore. He was about to shout, when the lantern was suddenly flashed in his face. He felt the cold muzzle of a revolver pressed against his forehead, and a hoarse voice whispered in his ear:

"Not a sound, or I'll blow your brains out. Where are the bonds?"

"What bonds?" gasped Dud, in a terrified whisper.

"The government bonds you've been hoarding up."

"Yes, and those railroad stocks," interposed the second burglar, fiercely.

"But I never owned any bonds or railroad stocks in my life!" insisted Dud, his amazement getting the better of his fright.

"Take care, you gilded money-king, don't try to bamboozle us," said the first burglar, sternly.

"Look here, you bloated bondholder, you might just as well disgorge," added his companion.

"For heaven's sake, gentlemen, don't shoot!" pleaded Dud, tremulously. "I'm telling you the honest truth, I haven't but five dollars in the world. It's in my pants pocket. Please take it and go."

"Do we believe him, Jake?" asked the first burglar.

"I guess we'll have to, Bill," was the response.

"I don't know about that," persisted Bill. "He may be lying to conceal his great wealth."

"Do you suppose he'd dare—the—the base caitiff?" inquired Jake, in a dramatic whisper.

"He's utterly wild and reckless," solemnly declared Bill. "He'd do us in a minute."

"I do not find the pouch of gold," continued Jake, as he rummaged the pockets of Dud's trousers.

"Where have you hidden it?" sternly demanded Bill.

"I—I—never had any," declared Dud, in terrified accents, "truly, I never."

"Shall we search him further?" asked Bill.

"No, I guess we'll have to be satisfied with this paltry rake-off," responded Jake.

"One word more, sir," whispered Bill, fiercely, seizing Dud by the ear, "do you intend to keep quiet while we leave here?"

"Ye—yes."

"Well, see that you do. It would be very annoying to have to come back and slice your windpipe."

"Or pare off your ears," added Jake.

"I won't say a word."

"Well, see that you don't."

"Won't you please leave me my clothes, gentlemen?"

"What do you say, Jake?"

"No, we can't think of it, Bill. We want them to wrap the five dollars in."

"Are these all you have?" asked Bill.

"Yes, all I've got here."

"Oh, well, you can lie in bed a day or two while they make you some new ones," said Jake. "A gruel diet would be good for your trouble."

A subdued groan was Dud's only response.

When the burglars had crowded his property into an ancient carpetbag which they carried, they climbed out of the window, and disappeared down the ladder.

As soon as they were out of sight Dud found his voice.

"Help! Murder! Robbers!" he shouted, in stentorian tones.

"Here, wake up! What's the trouble with you?" asked Ned, rolling over and giving him a punch in the ribs.

"I've been robbed—burglars have been here."

"Nonsense, man! You've been dreaming."

"No, I haven't, either. There were two burglars in here not more than a minute ago, and they've taken everything I had."

"Why didn't you yell?"

"How could I when one of them kept a revolver at my head?"

"How often do you have these nightmares?"

"I tell you it wasn't a nightmare," insisted Dud, indignantly. "I've been robbed."

"Let me see," said Ned, as he jumped from the bed. "I don't find any trace of them," he added, as he

groped his way to the door, which was partially ajar, and from which he presently returned on his hands and knees with a bundle, the contents of which he carefully spread out on the chair where Dud had placed his clothes before retiring for the night.

"What's all this noise about?" shouted Mr. Benson, from the foot of the stairs.

"I've been robbed," answered Dud, "burglars have been here."

"Burglars? Nonsense!" said the old gentleman, impatiently, as, light in hand, he entered the room. "You must have been dreaming. Better lie on your right side the rest of the night."

"I tell you I wasn't dreaming," protested Dud. "I never was wider awake in my life. There were certainly two burglars here, and they lugged off my clothes."

"Where did you leave your clothes when you went to bed?"

"On that chair."

"Well, here they are now."

"My clothes?" gasped Dud, incredulously.

"Yes, your clothes, my boy. You have probably had a nightmare. Now turn over on your side, forget all about it, and go to sleep," and Mr. Benson shut the door, leaving Dud greatly mystified, but not convinced.

Before descending the stairs Grandfather Benson looked in for a moment on Raymond and Byer. Both were snoring soundly, apparently oblivious of the

commotion which Dud had created. No sooner had Mr. Benson entered his own room, however, than a vast change came over them. Their snores ceased, and they rolled upon the bed in perfect paroxysms of laughter.

"Did you ever see the beat of that?" gasped Raymond.

"Never. It's lucky Dud's got his growth, or we'd certainly have scared him out of it."

"What did you do with that ladder?"

"I threw it down on the ground after we got in here."

"Well, we must get up before grandfather does, and carry it back to the stable."

"What shall we say to Dud to-morrow?"

"Laugh at him, and call it a nightmare."

"I shall never forget how he shook when I had that old revolver at his head," said Byer, breaking into another laugh at the remembrance. "The fellow was frightened half out of his wits."

"Ned got those clothes back in good shape. I heard grandfather say they were in the chair. I don't suppose Dud will talk of anything else but this for the next month."

But in this Raymond was mistaken. The big fellow had reluctantly, and with no little chagrin, arrived at the conclusion that his experience must have been, after all, a nightmare, and not until some time afterward was he known to refer to it.

CHAPTER XII

SOME EXPERIENCES WITH APPLE THIEVES

For several days the boys were too busily employed in the work of the farm to engage in much mischief, even at Dud's expense. The work was hard, and when night came and the chores were done, they were only too glad to go to bed. The big rocks in the front field had all been disposed of along the edge of the county road where Grandfather Benson had planned to lay a stretch of wall the following spring. The unsightly holes that remained where they had been blasted were carefully filled with rich soil, and the greater portion of the field staked off, to be broken up later on in the fall preparatory for the next season's potato crop.

"Did you know, Mr. Benson, that you will get very few of your apples if you don't look out?" said Byer, as they sat at supper the evening before this work was begun.

"What makes you think that?" was the smiling response.

"Because the apple thieves are as thick and as busy as bees this fall. They made a raid on David Clay's orchard night before last, and got over twenty bushels. Last night they were at Dean Perrin's, and secured

about ten bushels. They are working this neighborhood pretty strongly just at present."

"The last raid was a mighty bad thing for the town," said Dud, who occasionally dropped a dry remark when it was least expected.

"Why so?" asked Byer.

"Dean won't be able to pay his taxes this year."

A hearty laugh ran around the table, in which even Grandfather Benson joined.

"We musn't be too hard on Dean, boys," he said. "For all he is such a chronic growler, I've found him a most excellent man, and an accommodating neighbor. It is not surprising if he feels the loss of his apples. His orchard is not a large one, and apples are bringing high prices this fall."

"Byer's right, though, grandfather," said Raymond. "The thieves will be coming here next. I wish we had a dog."

"I believe I'd a good deal rather have the thieves than the dog," responded Grandfather Benson with a grimace. "They wouldn't fill the house full of fleas—that's one thing in their favor."

"It would be rather useless to argue the dog question with you," laughed Raymond. "I'll tell you what we'll do, though, Byer and I will pitch the little tent in the nursery and stand guard there to-night."

"I guess that would be a good idea," assented Grandfather Benson, "but I warn you that it will be a pretty cold business for you."

"Oh, we sha'n't mind that. We'll wrap up warmly."

"You might take mother's oil-stove. With that large sheet iron oven on, it will throw out considerable heat; enough to warm your hands by, anyway."

"That's a good idea," assented Raymond.

"Did you ever watch for apple thieves, Mr. Benson?" asked Byer.

"Yes, a number of times," was the smiling response.

"Did you ever catch one?" questioned Raymond.

Grandfather Benson paused a moment, and pushed his glasses up on his forehead. This the boys knew, from experience, was the signal for a story.

"I have discovered two, and assisted in the capture of one," he said, slowly. "The first was, in a way, an accident. A fellow named Simon Doane lived not far from us when I was a boy, who used to help us out more or less on the farm. One day he and I were hoeing potatoes, and the conversation turned on the general question of apple thieves. I don't know what possessed me to do it, but, in a spirit of banter, I turned to him and said: 'Simon, you've stolen apples out of our orchard.'

"'I never did anything of the kind,' he protested.

"'Yes you did,' I insisted, looking him squarely in the eye.

"With that he wilted, and, very much to my surprise, admitted the truth of the accusation.

"'Lem Jones and I were there a year ago this fall,' he confessed. 'I was up in the tree shaking down the

apples, and Lem was on the ground picking them up and putting them into bags. The apples kept hitting him on the head, and every now and then he'd stop and swear about it. I kept warning him that the folks would hear him; but he wouldn't pay any attention to me. By and by some one came out of the house, and we lit out. I always suspected it might be you.'"

The boys laughed heartily at this recital.

"'A guilty conscience needs no accuser,'" quoted Raymond.

"But there appears to have been one in this instance," observed Byer.

"What about the fellow you captured?" asked Dud.

"That was the fall I was eighteen years old," responded Grandfather Benson, "and it doesn't seem such a long time ago either. Father had bought the Neal place, which adjoined ours, the year before, and on it was a fairly good orchard. We had a fellow named Ben Keaton working for us, and he and I went out to guard the orchard one night. We hadn't been there long before we heard some one at work in the upper part of it, near the wood-lot. We stole up as quietly as we could, and suddenly swooped down upon a couple of big fellows who were at work under one of the trees. The minute they heard us they started to run. We chased them up to the back fence, where one of them succeeded in getting over into the woods. We caught the other one as he was astride the top rail, and pulled him back. He was a strapping big fellow, and

gave us a royal battle. At one time it looked as if he would get away in spite of us. Finally, however, I succeeded in tripping him, and we both got astride of him, and held him down. Keaton took off his home-made suspenders and ordered him to hold out his hands to be tied. He said he'd die first. Keaton, who was naturally a rough sort of a fellow, and pretty well warmed up with the tussle we'd had, kicked him once or twice in the head, in spite of my protests. It was harsh medicine, but it brought him to time. After we had bound him securely, we half carried and half hauled him to the house. Father and mother were sitting before a blazing open fire in the sitting-room, and were decidedly astonished when we dragged our prisoner into the circle of light that came from it, and which furnished the only illumination for the room.

" 'What's all this mean?' demanded father, sternly.

" 'This is an apple thief we caught up in the orchard,' I answered.

" 'What's your name?' demanded father.

" 'Why, you know me,' replied the prisoner, and in a minute it was all out. He was the son of a farmer who lived in the back part of the town—a most worthy man, and a personal friend of father's. Of course we lost no time in untying him, and, after a little good advice, father let him go."

"Who was he?" asked Dud.

"I don't think I'll tell you that," said Mr. Benson, with a smile. "He's one of the best citizens in Chest-

nut to-day, and one of my warmest friends. He brought the matter up of his own accord the last time I saw him, and said that, although the experience was the most humiliating one of his life, nothing had ever done him so much good. You see they had no orchard on his home farm at that time, and he and his brothers had been accustomed to hide away a few bushels of apples in the haymow every fall to last them through the winter. Their parents knew nothing of this, nor did we ever enlighten them on the subject. I think I am safe in saying, that from that day to this not one of those boys has ever laid his hands on anything that did not belong to him."

"I guess that's why you've always been so charitably disposed towards apple raiders," commented Raymond.

"Keaton wanted to take a gun with us that night," continued Mr. Benson, "but father wouldn't hear to it. I've shuddered to think what might have happened if he had granted our request."

Grandfather Benson was silent for a time, and the boys, seeing that he was busy with his own thoughts, forbore to interrupt him.

"I shall never forget the experience old Elder Tarbox had one dark night," he said, presently, with a chuckle. "He passed on to his reward before you boys were born, but most likely you've heard tell of him. He was a tall, raw-boned man, as strong as an ox, with a tremendously powerful voice. You could hear him about a mile from the camp-meeting grounds when he got warmed up in

exhortation. There were a good many demands upon a preacher in those days, and upon Elder Tarbox in particular. You see he'd been an old-fashioned herb doctor before the Lord called him to the ministry, and many of the people—especially the older ones—had great faith in his physical as well as his spiritual healing powers.

“Just beyond the Perrin farm, on the old Sanford place, lived Aunt Hannah Coombs, who was troubled with ‘sinking spells,’ from time to time. She was a big, stout woman, and apt to overeat, especially when there were mince pies in the house. One night word came to Elder Tarbox that Aunt Hannah was dying, and wanted him as quick as he could come. The good man didn't delay a minute, but grabbed up his carpet-bag and made for the Sanford place on the dead run. In order to save time he took a short cut through the upper part of Uncle Jabez Perrin's orchard—Uncle Jabez, who you know was Dean's father, had been watching for apple thieves, and when he caught sight of the elder streaking it through the dusk, he very promptly gave chase to him. If the elder had been fresh I guess he'd have won out; but you see he'd come quite a piece, and was a little winded, so about the time he was climbing over the other side of the fence, Uncle Jabez caught him by the coat-tails. The garment was a little tender, and when the elder pitched forward it split up to the collar on the back seam, and Uncle Jabez lost his hold. The elder supposed that he had been

waylaid by a robber; but he was not the man to show the white feather. Turning upon Uncle Jabez, who still stood on the other side of the fence, he roared in tones of thunder:

“‘Base sinner! what do you seek?’

“‘Elder Tarbox!’ gasped Uncle Jabez, recognizing his voice.

“The truth of the situation dawned on the elder, and he broke into a laugh that could have been heard about a mile. Uncle Jabez was awfully cut up over the matter, and offered to buy the elder a new coat, but the good man wouldn’t hear to it; said his wife could make it just as good as it was before. Of course the whole thing came out, and it was quite a spell before Uncle Jabez heard the last of it. For a long time, whenever he put in an appearance at the store or the blacksmith’s shop some wag was sure to greet him with ‘Base sinner, what do you seek?’ I don’t think he ever quite heard the last of it to the day of his death.”

The boys laughed loud and long at this story, and urged Grandfather Benson to further reminiscences; but he laughingly declared that he was “pumped dry.”

“Perhaps Dud would like to go out and stand guard with us,” suggested Byer, slyly, as they rose from the table.

“Not a bit of it,” said the big fellow, promptly. “I didn’t hire for that kind of work. Apple thieves are pesky desperate fellows when they are driven to close quarters. There’s been more than one good man laid

out by them in the history of this town, and I, for one, don't intend to take any chances with them."

"That's a good idea, Dud. A small fellow like you wouldn't stand much show," said Raymond.

"There's one thing you might do to help us, Dud," suggested Byer.

"What's that?"

"You might stay in the tent and holler 'shoo'."

"I thought you were going to say that I could help you over the fence on your way back to the house."

"I don't think we'll need you," laughed Raymond, "but say, you might lend us your gallowses."

"I'll agree to tie up any one you catch," declared Dud.

"You better be careful about your promises," cautioned Byer. "We'll surely hold you to them, and it's awful dark up in the orchard."

Dud made no reply to this pointed allusion to his timidity, but picked up a milk-pail and started for the barn. "Those fellows make me the butt of all their sport," he muttered. "Perhaps I deserve to be laughed at, though. I know I'm a 'fraid cat, but not so big a one, perhaps, as they think I am. I'm pretty well satisfied in my mind that those burglars were really Raymond Benson and Byer Ames. If I don't get even with them for that little prank, my name isn't Dudley Rich," and the big fellow slammed the barn door behind him with a force that showed a settled resolution on his part to turn the tables, if possible, upon his tormentors.

"I wouldn't be so hard on Dudley, boys," said Grandfather Benson, when the object of his remark had left the house. "There's such a thing as carrying your fun too far. He's pretty good-natured, and will stand considerable chaffing, but I think he felt hurt at what you just said to him."

"We didn't mean anything, grandfather," said Raymond.

"We were only in sport," added Byer.

"I know that, boys, but some of the cruelest and most cutting things have been said in fun. It is a good plan to avoid sport at the expense of other folk's feelings."

"I never thought Dud was sensitive," said Raymond.

"Well, he's not exceedingly so, but now and then I've thought the sharp points of your banter have made him a little sore. You must look out for that, boys. Don't carry your chaffing to excess."

"We'll be more careful in the future, grandfather," said Raymond. "Go up and get my gun, Byer."

"What do you want of that?" interposed Mr. Benson, as he paused in the doorway, milk-pail in hand.

"To take to the orchard."

"No, boys, that won't do at all. If you watch in the orchard, you must do so without firearms. I have never permitted armed men to stand guard there, and I never will. The experience I related to you at supper made me resolve years ago against taking such measures to guard my orchard."

"But what if thieves should come there?"

"Shout at them and drive them off. They won't lose any time in getting away when they find they are watched. It's apples they're after, not trouble."

"But what if they should show fight?"

"There won't be the slightest possibility of that if you'll only give them a chance to get away."

"Well, that's what I call mighty tame business," said Raymond, in deep disgust. "Here we are to watch in the orchard, and in case a thief comes along all we are permitted to do is to ask him, humbly and politely, if he won't please go away, instead of knocking him over and capturing him."

"That's enough, boys," said Grandfather Benson, quietly. "All we want to do is to save our apples. To-morrow I am going to let you two begin gathering them. I never have wanted to hazard life in my orchard. If men have guns in their hands, there is too much chance for accident. A neighbor might be taking a cross-cut from the back settlement, as they frequently do, and would be sure to be taken for a thief. No, boys, we'll run no chances. If you stay in the orchard to-night, you must leave your firearms at home."

After some grumbling Raymond and Byer assented to these terms, and a little later had the small A tent pitched in the midst of what was called the nursery. This was a thick clump of small apple trees on a knoll in the upper part of the orchard, which had been raised from the seed, and were the only ones on the farm that Grandfather Benson had not grafted. A large space

had been cleared in the center of the clump, and here those who watched over the apples had been able to pitch a small tent, and have it entirely concealed from view, while from their elevated post of observation they were able to see, on clear nights, all over the orchard, and to hear sounds in any part of it.

When the tent was arranged, and the oil-stove, together with a good supply of blankets, had been placed in it, the boys returned to the house, and went to bed. It was not necessary for them to begin their vigils before midnight. Apple thieves were never known to start in before that hour where the orchard was so near the house as was that of Mr. Benson. The boys were thus enabled to secure several hours of good sleep before they began their watch. Grandfather Benson consented to sit up till twelve o'clock, and wake them then. Before that he agreed to take a turn or two through the orchard himself, to make sure that no one got the start of them. With these details arranged the boys were soon fast asleep in Raymond's den.

CHAPTER XIII

A NIGHT IN THE ORCHARD

"Well, this is what I call frosty business," grumbled Byer, as he and Raymond stamped up and down the nursery knoll a few hours later. "I almost believe that men who stay out nights like these to steal apples earn them."

"Probably a less amount of work in some honest business would enable them to buy more apples," returned Raymond. "Let's go into the tent and see what that oil-stove will do to thaw us out."

Byer eagerly acceded to this suggestion, and the two boys entered the tent.

Scarcely were they out of sight before the dark form of a man stole softly along the fence, on the lower edge of the orchard. He was a big, strapping fellow, and evidently came to the orchard prepared for business. Under his arm he carried a large meal sack and over his shoulder a long pole. He was soon lost to sight among the trees in the upper part of the orchard.

"I declare, that stove isn't much better than nothing at all," said Raymond, as he and Byer emerged, shortly after, from the tent and stood again upon the knoll.

"Hark!" exclaimed Byer, abruptly. "Did you hear

that noise up there in the orchard? There's some one there, just as sure as you live," he added, excitedly.

Both boys listened with breathless intentness. Very distinctly upon the night air came the sound of some one busily at work in the upper part of the orchard. The boys could hear the vigorous whacks of his pole among the branches of the trees, and the thump of the apples as they fell upon the ground.

"It's a thief, sure's the world," said Byer, in a whisper tremulous with excitement.

"Yes, and he's getting in some heavy work," returned Raymond. "Oh, if we only had a gun. Had we better sing out at him?"

"I should say not."

"So should I. We want to catch him. We'll steal upon him unawares and take him prisoner. Wouldn't Grandfather Benson's eyes stick out, though, when we brought him in. Just think of it."

"See here, Raymond," said Byer, nervously, "let's not be rash. I don't want to come to close quarters with those fellows. There may be half a dozen of them, and they are probably armed."

"I don't think from the noise that there's more than one," answered Raymond. "If that's the case, two strong fellows like you and me ought to take care of him. We can creep up and see just what the situation is. If there's more than one, we'll yell at them and scare them off; but if that fellow's alone, as I think he is, we'll take him into limbo."

"Don't do anything rash, Raymond."

"Are you scared, Byer?"

"Not a bit of it. If we are going to have a fight I'm in for my share of it; but I don't want to get into a scrimmage where we are sure to get licked."

"I'm no more anxious to do that than you are, Byer. We'll look out for that."

With this cautious determination, the boys stole softly towards the upper part of the orchard. As they advanced, the operations of the thief became more audible. He was threshing about with his pole in a most energetic manner, and was evidently determined to make the most of his opportunity.

Dropping upon their hands and knees the boys crept cautiously along until they came within sight of the intruder. He was a large, powerfully-built fellow, and they could not help viewing his ample proportions and vigorous movements with serious misgivings.

"He's a tough one," whispered Byer. "I tell you we are going to have our hands full if we tackle him."

"The two of us can handle him," returned Raymond, confidently. "When we jump on him we want to come to close quarters at once and clinch with him, one of us on each side, and behind him if possible."

Just then the moon broke from behind a cloud and shone upon the man's face. It was black as ebony.

"Great Scott! It's a negro," whispered Byer, in amazement. "I don't know where he could have come from. There isn't a colored family in town."

"Very likely he's from Bolton. There are a number of negro families there. I'm inclined to think he won't give us as much trouble as a white man."

"Why not?"

"He won't have as much backbone."

"I don't know. You take a darky criminal and he's mighty apt to be a tough customer and unpleasantly handy with a knife."

While this conversation had been going on in subdued whispers the apple thief had been making good use of his time. With vigorous thrusts of the pole he knocked the big apples upon the ground and, picking them up, stowed them away in the bag.

"Let's go slowly," cautioned Byer. "When he shoulders that bag of apples and attempts to walk off with them, he will have about all he can take care of. That will be the time for us to close in on him."

"That's so," assented Raymond.

In a few minutes the thief had completed his work. Carefully tying up the mouth of the sack, he threw it lightly over his shoulder and started with it in the direction of the road. This was the opportunity Raymond and Byer had been waiting for. Dashing from their concealment they bore down upon him with all possible speed.

"Stop!" shouted Raymond.

"We've got you!" added Byer.

They closed in rapidly upon the thief, but before they could grapple with him a most unexpected thing hap-

pened. Suddenly dropping his bag of apples to the ground the burly negro turned upon them with startling rapidity. In a twinkling he had thrown Raymond upon the ground, and piled Byer on top of him. Then he calmly sat down upon them and held them there, despite their most frantic and furious struggles. The boys were perfectly powerless in his strong grasp.

During this vigorous action the thief had not spoken a word. So utterly unexpected had his movements been to the boys, who had been entirely confident of taking him by surprise, that they could scarcely credit their senses when they found themselves completely in his power. They were not the ones, however, to give up such a contest without a desperate struggle. They kicked and twisted and squirmed in a most vigorous and determined manner, but all to no purpose. They were as pigmies in the iron grasp of the black giant who sat astride them. At last, panting from exhaustion, they gave up the struggle, but as soon as they could find their voices they used them most vociferously.

"Help! Murder! Help!" they shouted in frantic tones.

This procedure on their part did not appear to disconcert the negro in the least, nor did he make the slightest attempt to stop their cries. Indeed, a dry chuckle which he gave indicated that he derived no little satisfaction from their sorry plight. No reply came to their cries, and, as a last resort, they were forced to parley with their captor.

"Say, what are you going to do with us?" demanded Raymond; but his question received no answer.

"See here, my good fellow," said Byer, addressing the negro in a more coaxing tone, "you've got the best of us. The fight was fair and square. We acknowledge ourselves licked. The prize was that bag of apples. You've won it. Now take it and go. We'll promise, honor bright, not to molest you or call for help."

For the first time the negro spoke.

"Well, that's perfectly satisfactory, boys, and mighty generous besides. Still, I think it's only fair for you to return my bonds and railroad stocks," he said, in a very familiar voice, as he arose from his prisoners and picked up his bag of apples again.

Raymond and Byer regained their feet and stood staring at him in speechless amazement. They could scarcely credit the evidence of their senses.

"Dud Rich!" they gasped in chorus.

"At your service, boys," responded the big fellow with a burst of laughter so loud and hearty that it seemed to fill the whole orchard, and woke a thousand echoes in the cedar swamp beyond the ridge.

"Well, I'm dished!" ejaculated Raymond, when he had assured himself beyond a doubt of Dud's identity.

"You may knock me down with a feather," added Byer.

"Didn't have a suspicion who it was, did you?" asked Dud, with obvious enjoyment of the situation.

"Not the slightest," confessed Raymond, frankly. "If you'd been the Old Nick himself you couldn't have astonished me more."

"You've duped us completely. I'll acknowledge the corn," admitted Byer, with a crestfallen air.

"What surprises me most of all, Dud, is to find you so far away from home at this hour of night," said Raymond.

"I really believe I could have gone through fire and flood to-night, if it had been necessary to get the under hold of you boys," laughed Dud, good-naturedly. "My gracious! but didn't it make me laugh when I saw you fellows creeping up and playing the scout on me. I knew pretty well, though, that you wouldn't close in on me until I shouldered the apples and started off with them, so I was all prepared to drop them at the proper time. I expected quite a tussle with you, but I did you up so easily that it astonished me almost as much as it did you. I thought I should die laughing when I was holding you down there, and you a-begging for mercy; but I had to keep in. I knew very well that you would recognize my voice just as soon as you heard it. Oh, but you two are great fighters, you are!" and the big fellow laughed heartily at the thought of his easy victory.

"I don't know, Dud," said Raymond, in no little chagrin. "I think we made a good fight under the circumstances. We were taken by surprise, and besides, every one says you are the strongest man in town."

"Well, I guess we had better call it quits, hadn't we?"

"Quits on what?" demanded Byer.

"That little burglar joke you played on me. I'll admit I was terribly frightened by it."

"What did we have to do with that affair?" asked Raymond, endeavoring to appear innocent.

"You and Byer had everything to do with it, and I'll admit you did it well," responded Dud, with conviction.

"You won't say anything about to-night's business, that's a good fellow, will you?" said Raymond, in a wheedling attempt to change the subject.

"I'll not, on just one condition—that you and Byer will never say anything more about the burglar affair."

"It's agreed," was the prompt response, and the three boys shook hands heartily over the compact.

As they neared the house they met Grandfather Benson coming toward them with a lantern in his hand.

"Why, what does this mean?" he inquired in apparent surprise, as he surveyed the group. "Who is this with you, boys?"

"Oh, a colored man we found stealing apples in the orchard," returned Raymond.

"Well, well, I declare. He comes along quietly, doesn't he? My sakes! Is that you, Dudley? Been masquerading on the boys, hey?"

"Yes, just a bit," grinned Dud.

"Well, there's no need watching any longer. We had all better go to bed," and Mr. Benson led the way

to the house, his round sides shaking now and then with suppressed laughter.

"Dud Rich isn't at the bottom of this night's fun, depend upon it," said Raymond, as he and Byer lay in bed in the den.

"Who is?"

"Grandfather Benson."

"I guess you must be mistaken. I don't believe Mr. Benson would have a hand in such a prank."

"Yes, he would, too. He's just as much a boy at heart as any of us. I can tell you he has enjoyed this night's fun a good deal more than Dud is able to."

"What makes you think Mr. Benson is at the bottom of this business?" demanded Byer, incredulously.

"A number of things. In the first place Dud isn't smart enough to think of such a joke, and, in the second place, he hasn't courage enough to carry it out alone, and no amount of chaffing on our part could nerve him up to it. I am convinced by the bold way Dud went about his work that grandfather planned the whole thing for him, and that he was waiting for him all the time in the lower part of the orchard. How he must have snickered when he heard us yelling for help."

"But I can't believe your grandfather would take part in a joke like that," persisted Byer.

"Yes, he would, too. Grandfather is as good a man as ever lived, but he's a mighty poor actor. His conduct when he met us to-night betrayed him completely. Don't you suppose he'd been considerably more flus-

tered if we'd brought in a real thief? Of course he would. He took matters altogether too calmly to-night. His attempt to appear surprised was terribly far-fetched; besides that, did you notice how quickly he recognized Dud? Do you suppose he'd been so discerning if he hadn't been in the joke? Not a bit of it."

"Well, even if he was the one who planned the thing, it only squares Dud up with us. I think we'd better keep pretty still about the whole matter, don't you?"

"Of course, that's the only wise thing for us to do," assented Raymond.

It may be as well to say right here that Raymond was correct in surmising that Dud's bold and successful practical joke had been inspired by Grandfather Benson.

"It's too bad," he had thought, as he followed the big fellow to the barn, "that those boys impose upon Dudley so. He's altogether too good-natured. If he'd only show a little temper now and then they wouldn't pester him nearly so much, or, what's better, if he could only get a good, sharp joke on them, they'd have four times the respect for him. H'm," he mused, as an idea came to him, "why can't he black up and play robber, to-night? He is able to handle both of the boys with perfect ease, and may be depended upon not to get mad, nor hurt either of them."

The good man kept his own counsel, but no sooner were the boys on their way to the orchard than he went to Dud's room, and waking him informed him of the joke which he had planned. The big fellow could

scarcely credit his senses. The spectacle of Grandfather Benson planning a practical joke upon Raymond and Byer was one that the widest stretches of his imagination would never have reached to.

"Are you really in earnest?" he ejaculated, when he had recovered somewhat from his amazement.

"I was never more so in my life. If you want to put an effective stop to the banter of those boys you will have to play such a joke on them as will offset the one they played on you the other night. I've been turning that affair over in my mind, and haven't much doubt that they were the burglars who disturbed your slumbers, and that the Grover boy was a party to the prank. I confess, though, they played it pretty well on the whole of us. I really thought at the time that you had had a nightmare. You have a splendid chance now to pay them back in their own coin, and you mustn't miss it."

"But I don't believe I want to go up there alone to-night."

"Nonsense, Dudley, there's nobody there but the boys. You are not afraid of them, are you?"

"No, but—"

"But what?"

"It's terribly dark up there."

"Darkness never hurt any man; but if you feel nervous, I'll go to the lower edge of the orchard and wait within call for you."

"All right, I'll go," said Dud, eagerly, satisfied with this practical relief to his fears. When his preparations

were completed, Grandfather Benson assured him that neither of the boys would recognize him. When they parted at the foot of the orchard Mr. Benson urged him to make the joke a complete success by playing his part boldly. How well he carried out his instructions our readers know.

Raymond and Byer looked a little sheepish the following day at dinner, which was the first meal they were up in time for; but neither Grandfather Benson nor Dud made any reference to the affair of the preceding night. The boys accepted the truce thus delicately offered, and from that time forth the apple thief and Dud's burglars were persons never referred to.

CHAPTER XIV

A CHESTNUT SOCIALIST

About a week later the stage from the Corner stopped at the house to leave some packages, and Raymond, who went out to take them, was surprised to find among the passengers Mr. David Beecham, who held out his hand to him very cordially with a hearty "Good-morning."

"Good-morning, Mr. Beecham," returned Raymond. "Aren't you a good way from school?"

"Yes, quite a distance, but this is my vacation time. The term is closed."

"Why, I thought it kept five weeks longer," said Raymond, in surprise.

"Well, that was the original intention, but the money didn't hold out. Some of those who subscribed failed to pay, and it was found necessary to cut the term short."

"Will you teach at the Corner again?"

"I think not. I graduate from college next June, and shall begin the study of law. I have probably closed my career as a teacher."

"Mr. Beecham," said Raymond, earnestly, "I want to ask your pardon for my outrageous conduct this term. There was no excuse for it. I have none to offer. I only wonder at your forbearance."

"Don't mention it, Raymond," responded Mr. Beecham, much affected. "I never laid up your mischief against you, for I always felt that your heart was in the right place. If I can be of service to you in the future, I trust you will believe me your friend, and will not hesitate to call upon me."

"I certainly shall. I could have no stronger proof of it than you have just given."

The two shook hands warmly, and Raymond watched the stage disappear over the hill with a feeling of relief from the burdens of conscience that he had not experienced since he left the High School.

The work of gathering apples proved much more congenial to Raymond and Byer than hauling rocks, and they were only too glad to devote their energies to it while Grandfather Benson and Dud were engaged in breaking up the front field.

Not far from the Benson farm lived a man named Noah Griffin, who bore the reputation among Chestnut people of being one of the most shiftless men in the county. His farm, notwithstanding the many granite boulders that dotted its surface, was one of the most productive in town, and had it been properly cultivated might have brought its owner excellent returns. Noah Griffin, however, had a strange faculty of always doing things at the wrong time, and never doing anything thoroughly. His breaking up was usually done so late in the fall that it was shut off by the early frosts before it was completed, thus going over to retard the labors

of the following spring. He was generally the last man in Chestnut to get his crops into the ground, and the last to harvest them.

He spent time and money enough repairing worn-out farm vehicles and implements to have purchased several full sets of new ones. More labor had been expended by him in patching up the leaky roofs of his farm buildings than would have been required to shingle them newly twice over. He never thought of doing any work upon his fences until his cattle were running loose in the road, and then his favorite method of closing the breach was to fill it with brush.

As a result of this shiftless way of doing things, the Griffin place had long presented a neglected and dilapidated appearance. Noah's farming implements were strewn in promiscuous confusion about the premises. The dooryard was his favorite place of storage. It was never without a variegated collection of ox yokes, carts, drags, rakes, axes, ploughs, harrows—in fact, there was scarcely anything about the place that did not figure there at some time during the year.

Noah's house was of a pattern very familiar in the early days of the county, and even now to be found there in certain localities. It had originally been built by one of the settlers upon,—as Raymond Benson expressed it—"the plan of a shoe box," with a roof of low slant. When the needs of a growing family demanded more room an addition was built upon one side of it, with a shed roof in continuation of the house

roof reaching down to within ten feet of the ground. The two chimneys which the structure boasted were in the old part of the house, above whose moss-grown shingles they lifted but a few feet of blackened bricks and mortar.

As may be imagined, few changes had been made in the place after it came into the possession of Noah Griffin. To him its most attractive spot was the large open fireplace in the front sitting-room. He loved dearly to sit in his stocking feet before its cheerful blaze, toasting his pedal extremities and drawing immeasurable inspiration from a short, black pipe, which was the inseparable companion of the clock upon the mantelpiece.

It was doubtless the fact that the cares of life rested lightly upon Noah's shoulders that gave him an abundance of time to proclaim the evils of the age. Be that as it may, his favorite pastime was to sit upon one of the nail kegs in Squire Copeland's store, chew immense quantities of tobacco, and bemoan the hard life that farmers were forced to live. To prosperity in any form he was irrevocably opposed. He appeared to regard those who had exchanged honest industry for a well-to-do condition in life as the enemies of mankind. They were always, to his mind, "bloated 'ristocrats," and he was very fond of assuring those who would listen to him that the time would come when down-trodden laboring men like himself would rebel against the tyranny of capital, the unjust distribution of wealth

that was forever grinding them upon the ragged edge of life. Then, he predicted, would come such a revulsion of feeling, such a mighty shaking up of affairs, such an outpouring of the righteous indignation of the oppressed masses—whom he conceived to be a great army of Noah Griffins—as would break down the artificial barriers of wealth, and give to every man, woman and child an equal share in the good things of life. This was the golden era to which Noah looked forward with hopeful anticipation. In the meantime, he managed to bear up under the grievous burdens of a social system founded upon industry, through the solace he sucked from his venerable pipe, and the inspiration he derived from occasional visits to the home of Pete Atkins.

On one occasion Noah had ventured to give expression to a few of his theories in open town-meeting, when the question of offering exemption from taxation to a proposed woolen mill was under discussion. He had warmed to his subject as he dilated upon the inequalities with which “we laborin’ men” were forced to contend. Why, he demanded, should those of them who toiled early and late to scrape together a mean, ignoble livelihood, a subsistence unworthy of American citizenship, be forced to contribute from their scanty earnings to the prosperity of a grasping and bloated corporation? Why, indeed! As Noah proceeded with his remarks, his voice assumed a stentorian pitch. With fiery invective he denounced the tyrannical oper-

ations of the "money-barons" who, not satisfied with securing pretty much all the property in the world, were savagely determined to rake into their already bursting coffers the very victuals from the poor man's table.

At this interesting point in his remarks, the frowzy head of a small boy appeared at a window in the rear of the hall, and a shrill voice shouted, "Mr. Griffin, your cattle 's in the pound."

A burst of uproarious laughter followed this announcement, during which Noah lost the thread of his discourse and sat down, very much flustered and exceedingly red in the face.

Notwithstanding this humiliating collapse of his oratorical effort, there was balm-of-gilead for Noah in the fact that the proposition to exempt was defeated by a small vote, although it was strongly supported by Andrew Benson, whose opinions usually prevailed in town affairs.

The new woolen mill was therefore established in the adjoining town of Bodge, which voted the exemption. A thriving community grew up about it, and many Chestnut citizens moved there to obtain employment, carrying with them a large amount of property. The following year the tax-rate was reduced in Bodge and advanced in Chestnut. Despite these facts, Noah always maintained that he had saved his town from a heavy loss of taxes, and, by his timely grasp of the situation, had forever snatched it from the clutches of corporate power.

Noah's better-half, Matilda Griffin, was a tall, raw-boned woman, who had been accustomed for many years to perform a large amount of the work that, in the usual division of labor, would have fallen upon her liege lord. She was an energetic soul, and it was chiefly due to her untiring industry that she and Noah were always comfortably dressed and had enough to eat. Matilda—or Aunt Tilly, as she was familiarly called by her acquaintances—was not a woman of prepossessing appearance. She was loose-jointed and angular. Her features were thin and sharp, and she had an exceedingly shrill and penetrating voice. She wore her hair in a tight pug on the back of her neck, and was generally clad in a loose, print wrapper, from under which protruded a substantial pair of leather slippers. These, as they had originally been purchased for Noah, were several sizes too large for her. As she went about her household tasks, the heels of this com-modious foot-gear beat a tattoo upon the floor in accompaniment to her thoughts, and in keeping with the vigor of her movements.

Older citizens of Chestnut remembered her years before as a bright, ambitious girl, of a lively and sunny disposition. Thirty years of married life with Noah Griffin had transformed her into a soured and disappointed woman, prematurely old. Life had, indeed, few pleasures for her.

As she grew older she became a firm believer in spiritualism, and appeared to extract some comfort

from this faith. Although Noah was naturally a superstitious man, with a profound trust in many signs and omens, he had heaped no end of ridicule upon his wife for what he termed her "nonsensical notions"; but he was unable to shake her faith. She declared, with no little vehemence, that what she knew she *knew*, and nothing any one could say would make the slightest difference with her. As she was not a particularly agreeable companion when in a contentious mood, Noah had gradually come to make less comment upon her faith in spiritualism. He was also impelled to this course by a haunting fear that, after all, she might be right. In view of such a possibility, he concluded that silence might prove in the long run to be golden, and cautiously held his peace.

It was a source of no little irritation to Raymond and Byer, upon returning to the orchard from dinner one day, to find Noah's cattle within the enclosure, engaged in a very active work of destruction. A basket of choice nodheads, from a small tree in which Grandfather Benson felt a special pride, was overturned, and such of the fruit as had not been eaten was so badly bitten and trampled upon as to render it worthless.

"I declare!" exclaimed Raymond, angrily. "There can never be any bars down, or gates left open, in this town but Noah Griffin's cattle are sure to sneak through and get into mischief. Here they've spoiled the very best nodheads in the orchard. Grandfather was going

to select the ones for the county fair from that very basket. Any man who can't keep his cattle out of the highways ought not to be allowed to have any."

"I'll fix them," responded Byer, as he picked up a shot-gun.

"What are you going to do?" asked Raymond, hastily.

"I'm going to give these cattle a dose of something warming."

"No, you're not."

"Why not?"

"Because it would be a mean, cowardly act. You'll say so, too, Byer, if you'll think a minute. These cattle are not to blame for running the roads; it's the fault of their owner, who is too lazy to keep his fences in decent repair. Any cattle would run the road as much as these do if they had as good a chance."

"I guess you're right, Raymond," responded Byer, whose anger was rapidly cooling. "Noah's the one who ought to be shot. It would be mean to hurt his cattle. I declare, though, I haven't any patience with that man. He's the most shiftless, good-for-nothing fellow I know of. Why, he's actually spent time enough making pokes and blinds for cattle not in the least breachy to have built a fence as good as your grandfather's around his whole farm. I vow, he deserves to be ridden out of town on a rail."

"He's a worthless fellow, Byer, that's a fact, and perhaps we can find a way to convince him of it."

"No, you couldn't do that. He has altogether too good an opinion of himself. He knows too much to work," said Byer, disgustedly.

"There's truth in what you say," replied Raymond, as he drove the last offending cow into the road and closed the gate behind her. "I have an idea in mind, though, that may be of service in letting Noah hear the voice of public opinion."

"What's that?"

"Let's finish gathering these apples and I'll show you. I think we can get through by three o'clock, and that will give us till supper-time to develop my plan."

The boys set to work with a will, and by the middle of the afternoon had the last basketful of apples safely stowed away in the cellar. When this had been done, Raymond led the way to the workshop in the shed connecting the ell of the house with the stable.

"Now what?" queried Byer, whose curiosity was considerably excited to learn the method by which Raymond proposed to give Noah Griffin a knowledge of what his neighbors thought of him.

"Well, the first thing, Byer, will be for you to take this axe and go to the swamp. Cut down a sapling maple, with the trunk as nearly round as you can find, and from three to three and one-half inches in diameter. Bring me a piece of it from next the stump, about two feet long."

"I don't see what you can want of that," said Byer, as he swung the axe over his shoulder.

"I'll show you when you get back."

"Well, I can't imagine what it can be," was Byer's mystified response as he started toward the swamp.

When he had gone, Raymond pulled from under the work-bench a large box which had long been used as a receptacle for a miscellaneous collection of odds and ends. After rummaging about among its contents for a while, he pulled from it a long piece of rubber hose, which had formerly done duty on a force-pump. This he viewed with no little satisfaction.

"I thought I couldn't be mistaken about seeing this here," he soliloquized. "It will be exactly what we want. There must be nearly twenty feet of it, and this hole near the end seems to be the only one in it. I guess I'll cut this lower part off; it must be air-tight for my purpose—there, I think that will fill the bill."

In a short time Byer returned from the swamp with a handsome, straight maple stick about three inches and a half in diameter.

"Will that do?" he asked, as he laid it on the bench.

"Yes, that's exactly what I wanted. Now, Byer, I wish you'd put that in the vise and saw the end off squarely; then bore a hole in it about three inches deep with the two-inch auger. You must be sure and get the hole in the center. Place the point of your auger in the pith of the stick."

"I begin to see why you wanted a green stick," said Byer, as he followed Raymond's directions. "You were afraid of splitting a dry one."

"That's it exactly. I've tried it a number of times, and you are almost sure of splitting a dry stick of this size when you bore so large a hole in the end of it. There is seldom any trouble with a green stick."

"What next?" asked Byer, with a puzzled air, as he pulled the auger from the hole he had bored.

"Well, now you may take the three-quarters-inch auger, center it upon the bottom of the hole you have just finished, and bore another five inches deep."

"Why, that will be a wooden tunnel."

"Precisely. That's just what we are going to make—two wooden tunnels."

"I don't see what use you can have for them."

"I'll show you pretty soon. The first one you may leave on the inside just as it was bored; the second one you may rim out about the mouth, on the plan of a tin tunnel."

"Then what?"

"Then we'll place the two tunnels in the ends of this hose and have a splendid speaking-tube. We can talk into the first tunnel, and the second one will throw the voice out in good shape."

"But what will you do with it, after it's all done?"

"You and I will go down to Noah Griffin's with it to-night. We'll take a short mow ladder with us from the barn, and have on an extra pair of stockings. About the time Noah and Tilly are beginning to doze before the open fire, we'll steal up on the roof of the house in our stocking feet, drop this speaking-tube into

the chimney and give them a spiritualistic seance, more weird than anything in that line they have ever dreamed of."

"That's a good idea," laughed Byer, approvingly; "but don't you suppose they'll see through it?"

"Not at all. They are altogether too superstitious for that."

"Well, perhaps that's so, but if they are fooled by this contrivance they are greener than I think they are."

"If everything works right, we'll have a little sport at Noah's expense, and teach him a useful lesson," said Raymond, confidently.

By supper-time the boys had their speaking-tube completed, and, with a little practice, Raymond developed a voice on it so hollow, lugubrious, and long drawn out that Byer was convulsed with laughter, and declared that it might well belong to another world, for it was certainly dolefully different from anything in this.

It was about eight o'clock when the boys finally brought up at Noah's house. They had not dared to defer their visit to a later hour, for Chestnut people retired early, and the Griffins did not differ from their neighbors in this respect. They generally sat before the open fire for a couple of hours after the evening chores were done, and then went to bed.

These short evenings were usually passed in reading, or in discussing the affairs of their neighbors, in which

both Noah and Tilly had a lively interest. Each took a newspaper, one a socialist publication after Noah's own heart, the other a spiritualist sheet which Tilly found quite indispensable. Thus both the religious and secular worlds were provided for. Outside these papers, however, the Griffins were not very extensively supplied with literature. A Testament, a well-worn Webster's Dictionary, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Towne's Fourth Reader, and the Maine Farmer's Almanac constituted their library. Although the volumes were few, it must be admitted that they were carefully selected, and their begrimed and thumb-marked pages showed that they had been many times "chewed and digested," in accordance with the famous advice of Lord Bacon—although it is extremely doubtful if either Noah or Tilly had ever heard of such a personage.

CHAPTER XV

NOAH GRIFFIN'S REFORMATION

On the evening when Raymond and Byer made their visit to the Griffin homestead, Noah and Tilly had finished their chores somewhat earlier than usual. As was customary, the lion's share of the work had fallen upon the good woman. Noah felt that he had done all that could reasonably be expected of him by getting in the wood and preparing the morrow's kindlings, while his wife did the milking.

He was in a rather more meditative mood than usual, as he toasted his feet before the open fire, and blew large puffs of smoke up the chimney from his short, black pipe.

"I've be'n a-thinkin', Tilly," he announced, with impressive deliberation, "as how you an' me might git a livin' a pesky sight easier 'n what we do."

Mrs. Griffin dropped the stocking she was knitting into her lap, and looked at him with mingled contempt and forbearance.

"Huh!" she sniffed, "what new notion 's got afoul of ye now?"

"Bone labor was never my stronghold," continued Noah.

"True 's gospel," assented Tilly, "but you was never man enough to own it afore."

"The Lord gin me my brains t' make my livin' with," continued Noah, not noticing the interruption.

"Do tell!" was Tilly's sarcastic comment. "I allus s'picioned es how ye thought He gin ye a wife fer thet purpose."

"G' 'long with yer badgerin' an' naggin'," said Noah, irritably.

"An' what was ye cal'latin' t' do?" she sighed, with an air of resignation.

"Why, I thought as how we might put a mortgage on this place an' git a little stock in the Louisiana Development an' Investment Company. Stock 's sellin' for twenty now an' Sime Dart ses 't will be wuth a dollar twenty inside o' ten years. Think o' thet, Tilly! We could leave this old house, buy a cosy little place 't the Corner, an' settle down an' be somebody."

"So thet's what yer drivin' at, is it?" demanded Tilly, scornfully. "I don't s'pose them harts the Scriptur' tells about ever began t' pant fer the water-brooks like what you hanker for a nail keg in Cope-land's store."

"Now, Tilly—" began Noah, deprecatingly; but she promptly shut him off.

"Who's a-sellin' o' this stock?" she demanded.

"Sime Dart."

"Sime Dart!" she repeated, contemptuously. "Don't ye flatter yourself for one minute thet I'll trust thet

oily, smirkin' hypocrit'. Thank goodness, I'm not wholly bereft o' my senses, howsumever it may be with you."

"Pete Atkins ses it's good's gold," persisted Noah.

"Pete Atkins!" said Tilly, with rising inflection. "He's bad as Sime. They're two of a kind. I wouldn't put no confidence in ary one on 'em."

"I swan you allers try t' rile me," said Noah, peevishly. "Can't ye put jest a little dependance in my jedgment?"

"Your jedgment!" repeated Tilly, disdainfully. "Shucks! You've had a new scheme 'most ev'ry day. If you'd worked quarter es hard with yer hands es yer hev with yer mouth we'd hed suthin' now."

"You know, Tilly," said Noah, reproachfully, "es how I hain't ever been rale well. My rheumatiz troubles me a sight."

"Lord-a-massy, you pore, sickly creetur!" exclaimed Tilly, with mock sympathy. "I don't remember a day fer years when you wasn't ekel t' three square meals o' victuals. Them es eat can work, 's my motto."

"It's no use a-harpin' on thet ole strain, Tilly," said Noah, resentfully. "I gin up expectin' of yer t' understand me some time ago. What d' ye think o' my scheme?"

"Stuff an' nonsense! Where do yer s'pose the money's comin' from t' make thet stock so valy'ble?"

"Out o' the profits."

"Out o' the fiddlesticks!" retorted Tilly, derisively.

"You hain't got so much sense es I gin ye credit fer. The only fellers that gits any profits air the ones es works the swindle."

"Land o' Goshen, Tilly! Ye didn't understan'," exclaimed Noah, petulantly. "I've got"—here Noah cast a cautious glance about the room, and lowered his voice to a confidential whisper—"a chance t' git in on the inside."

"Goodness sakes alive! ye don't say? I guess ye better lay low fer a spell. If Sime Dart ever gits ye on the inside he'll be mighty sure t' shove the bolts on the outside. Thank the Lord, this 'ere place can't go out o' our hands 'thout my consent. If it could the both on us ud ha' ben in the poorhouse years ago."

Noah was about to make a resentful response to this emphatic declaration, when both he and Tilly were startled by a most unexpected and terrifying occurrence.

"N-o-a-a-a-h," came a weird, unearthly voice from the chimney.

"Di—did ye hear that, Tilly?" he gasped.

"Don't yer s'pose I got ears?" responded the good woman, grimly. She had dropped her knitting-work into her lap, and was holding up her hands in open-mouthed consternation. "Thet was a sperit, Noah. I've hearn 'em rap an' whisper a good many times, but I'll allow I never hearn 'em holler right out like thet afore."

"Hadn't we better go, Tilly?" asked Noah, nervously.



"THERE, I KNOWED 'T WAS A SPERIT!" EXCLAIMED TILLY,
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"Go where?" she demanded.

"Down t' Grover's or Benson's. You know we haven't run in on ary one on 'em for a long spell."

"I guess we'd better stay right where we air," responded Tilly, with decision. "Don't be fool enough, Noah Griffin, t' think you can run away from a sperit. He'd ketch ye 'fore you'd gone a rod. If thet sperit's got anything t' say t' ye depend upon it he's goin' t' say it."

"Perhaps 'twas only the wind," suggested Noah, with evident agitation, but the idea was speedily dispelled.

"No-a-a-h Gri-i-iffin," moaned the same weird, unearthly voice in the chimney.

"Answer 'im, you—you numskull," commanded Tilly, sharply, as her husband rose to his feet, and, with blanched face, moved his chair away from the fireplace.

"Wh—who is it?" demanded Noah.

"I am the spirit of condemnation."

"There, I knowed 'twas a sperit!" exclaimed Tilly, triumphantly. "Now I guess ye'll take a little stock in what I be'n a-tellin' of ye. Ask him what he wants. Be sociable, ye simpleton."

"Wha-wha' d'ye want?" stuttered Noah in accents of terror. His face was ghastly white, and his teeth chattered.

"To pronounce the verdict of public opinion on your worthless life," came the solemn reply, in accents of

reproach that brought the cold sweat to Noah's forehead, and made the chills run down his back-bone. "You've been a miserable, lazy, shiftless, worthless, complaining creature, Noah Griffin," continued the voice in tones of deep and doleful censure.

"I—I—know it," humbly admitted Noah.

"You've allowed your good wife to do work no woman should do; you've been envious of your more industrious neighbors; you have never kept your fences in repair, and your cattle have run in the roads to be the pests of the town. What sayest thou to these charges, oh, miser-r-r-able man?"

"Noth-nothin'," weakly responded Noah.

"Your neighbors are all disgusted with you."

"I dare say."

"You deserve to be dragged down from this world forever-r."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned the terror-stricken man. "Say suthin' to 'im, Tilly."

"This is none o' my affair," responded the good woman, grimly. "Thet 'ere sperit's arter you. Them same things hes be'n whispered t' me a good many times."

"No-a-a-h, I have come for you," moaned the sepulchral voice in the chimney.

"Spare me! Have mercy!" shrieked the horrified victim. "I'll do diff'runt. I promise ye I'll turn over a new leaf."

"Will you do the milking for your wife?"

"Ye-e-e-s."

"Will you build a good bunk fence of whole cedar logs clear round your farm?"

"I will—I promise ye."

"Will you stop your grumbling and complaining and bone down to work?"

"I'll—I'll try."

"Very well. You may remain here a while longer, but on probation—mind you, only on probation. Woe, woe, woe to you, unfortunate man, if I come again. I shall expect you to begin work on that fence this very week."

"I will, I will."

"I go; but be no longer a cumberer of the earth. If thou failest to heed this warning thou wilt have sinned away the day of thy redemption. Farewell, farewell."

The ghostly voice in the chimney became silent; but Noah still sat pale and motionless in his chair. It was evident that the ordeal through which he had passed had left him thoroughly frightened and exhausted.

"Took the starch out o' ye, I reckon," was his wife's grim comment.

"It's the finger o' fate, Tilly," he groaned, dismally. "It hes p'inted the way t' me, an' I must abide by it."

As may well be imagined, the astonishing effect of their speaking-tube joke upon Noah and Tilly Griffin was a source of no little jubilation to Raymond and Byer. If the alarmed and astounded couple could have seen them shake and titter and punch each other in the

ribs, in the effort to hold back a torrent of laughter, as they stood over the old chimney on the roof-top, it is to be seriously doubted if their seance would have been attended with such practical results.

"Did you ever see the beat of that?" giggled Byer, in a convulsed whisper. "I had no idea they would bite so easily. You are certainly a star performer, old man."

"They are just the fish to bite that kind of bait," returned Raymond. "If they hadn't been you may be sure I shouldn't have tried it. You must bear in mind that it's all real to them."

"Tilly's by far the braver of the two," whispered Byer, a moment later.

"Of course she is," returned Raymond. "What did you expect? She's always been the real man of the house, and besides that she's lived among spirits so long that she feels a good deal more at home with us than Noah does."

Byer chuckled merrily at this conceit. "You beat creation at this sort of business," he said, with an approving slap on Raymond's shoulder. "What's that Noah just said?"

"He's promised to do the milking for Tilly if we'd let him remain on this mundane sphere a while longer."

"The milking! I reckon you've driven the man crazy. He'd never make such a promise as that in his sober senses."

"Possibly," returned Raymond. "I rather guess that there'll be a little more method than heretofore in

his madness. What do you suppose he's just promised to do?"

"I can't imagine."

"To build a fence of whole cedar rails clear round his farm."

"That settles it. The man has certainly gone daft. You've frightened him out of his wits."

"No, I rather think I've scared him into them," said Raymond. "He's just promised to try to be content with his lot in life."

"Proof enough," said Byer, decisively. "The poor fellow has certainly gone stark, staring mad. It may be, though, that you've hypnotized him by the soothing effect of that voice of yours."

"Perhaps that's it. Be careful there, Byer! Don't make so much noise on those shingles. We don't want to lose the results of this seance. I think Noah has been born again to-night. I've found him a very docile pupil; nothing cantankerous or contentious about him this trip, I can tell you."

At this moment the moon broke from a bank of clouds, and lit up the night with its mellow beams.

"It won't do for us to stay here any longer," whispered Byer. "You must ring down the curtain, old man, on Noah and Tilly. Any one driving on the main road could see us just as plain as day."

"I'm all through," said Raymond, and a moment later both boys were back upon the ground again in the rear of the house.

"How did you leave him?" asked Byer, as they walked away.

"On probation."

"Do you have any idea he'll keep his promises?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it."

"I think you were a little too rough in one thing," continued Byer.

"What's that?"

"You made him promise to be contented with his lot. Why Noah Griffin wouldn't be himself if he couldn't do a certain amount of growling. He finds his greatest joy in life in complaining about somebody or something. It's my opinion that you have killed him, cruel, cruel spirit," he added, with mock solemnity.

"I reckon he'll be too busy hereafter to indulge in that sort of pastime," laughed Raymond. "Still I wasn't as hard on him as you imagine. I only made him promise to *try* to be contented. I was liberal with him, you see, for I knew that however willing Noah might be in the spirit—and you must remember that this night's proceedings have been conducted wholly in the spirit—he might fall from the lofty purposes there formed when he found himself forced to contend with the flesh."

"I rather guess that will be the outcome of his efforts," laughed Byer.

This prophecy, however, proved to be incorrect. From that day a marked change came over Noah Griffin's life. The people of Chestnut were astonished

to see a new fence grow up about his place that fairly vied for first honors with the famous one of Andrew Benson. Noah's buildings were newly shingled and put in repair; his dooryard was cleaned up; his fall ploughing was done long before the frosts came; and he and Tilly began to make their appearance Sundays at the Corner meeting-house. The startling rumor grew current in the town that Tilly no longer did the milking. People were afforded the novel spectacle of Noah Griffin working early and late. They began to speak of him as a likely man, and to wonder what had wrought such a marvelous transformation in him. But those who were able to clear up the mystery held their peace, and Chestnut people were forced to record it among the modern miracles.

CHAPTER XVI

BURNING OF GRANDFATHER BENSON'S BARN

As Raymond and Byer were descending the long hill that sloped down the bank of the brook opposite the Benson homestead, they met a team coming slowly up the ascent. It was a long, loose-running, open buggy, of somewhat ancient design, drawn by a heavy farm horse. The driver was closely muffled up in a heavy buffalo coat. His broad-brimmed felt hat was drawn well over his eyes, and he leaned forward upon his seat as if deeply engrossed in his reflections. As the boys came opposite him he suddenly straightened up and gave them a sharp, piercing look. Raymond was surprised to recognize, in the bright moonlight, the face of old Pete Atkins. The look of malignant hatred which it wore showed that its owner still cherished very bitter memories of the affair on Bent Hill, in which his favorite dog had come to an untimely end.

Raymond was not by any means a timid boy, as the reader, doubtless, has already discovered. He was resolute and energetic, and unusually cool for his years. Nevertheless, there was something in the look which the Chestnut rumseller gave him from under his shaggy eyebrows that made him feel decidedly uncomfortable.

"That fellow will never be satisfied until he feels that he has squared himself with me by doing me some injury," he mused.

The savage hatred of old Pete's glance had not escaped the attention of Byer, either, although, as Raymond had kept his own counsel regarding the affair on Bent Hill, he did not assign any personal motive for it, or attach any significance to it so far as himself and his companion were concerned.

"That old rascal's up to some mischief, I'll be bound," he said, "or else he's thinking over some of the deviltry he's done in the past. I suppose it would take a good many large volumes to tell of all his doings. Whew! but did you notice the scowl he had on? His eyes, too, glittered just like a snake's. Something's riled him up, sure's the world."

"He was evidently thinking pretty hard about something," answered Raymond, who was turning over some anxious thoughts in his own mind.

"I shouldn't say the old fellow found much pleasure in his reflections," continued Byer, with a shake of his head. "He looked like a man with the colic. Did you ever see such a fiendish expression on a human face?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Right here on this hill," said Raymond, with a short and somewhat rueful laugh, rousing himself from the despondency which his meeting with Pete had produced, and making a forced effort to appear natural.

"Oh, I know that," responded Byer, impatiently. "I meant anywhere else; besides, I hope you don't think I'd call that a human face. Pete Atkins has the general aspect of a gorilla. He always made me believe there was some truth in that idea of man descending from monkeys."

"And a great descent it was, too—for some of them," said Raymond.

"Let me see; what is it you call that—the some kind of a notion?"

"The Darwinian theory?"

"Yes, that's what I was driving at. I think he's one of those links they've had so much trouble to find."

"You're prejudiced, Byer," said Raymond, lightly.

"Perhaps I am. I'll allow I have my likes and dislikes, so far as people are concerned. I always form a sort of opinion of every stranger I meet. Some I kind of warm towards, while others make me feel as chilly as an ice-cake. I can't explain why it is, and I know it's foolish; but it's so, all the same. I suppose we ought not to sit in judgment upon any one's character until we have some reasonable grounds to do it on."

"I agree with you there, Byer," said Raymond, "first impressions are very apt to be incorrect. We shouldn't let the prejudices they stimulate get the upper hands of our cooler judgment. There are a good many excellent people in the world whose manner is against them, and who, if judged entirely by the impression they create with strangers, would never be appreciated for

their true worth. You take a bashful, retiring, timid person, lacking in self-confidence, and he is very apt to make a poor showing with those who are unacquainted with him. He will stammer, and blush, and get confused. His words will seem to come back-foremost, though perhaps among his friends he may be brilliant and fluent. I tell you, Byer, you can't tell from outside appearance how much there is in a man, any more than you can tell how far a cat can jump from the length of her tail."

"That's so," assented Byer. "The safest way is to suspend judgment on the people around us until we have time and opportunity to become fully acquainted with them."

By this time the boys had reached the farmhouse. It stood dark and silent, its inmates wrapped in slumber. They were a little puzzled at first as to how they should reach their room without arousing Grandfather and Grandmother Benson, both of whom were light sleepers.

They stood for a moment by the door in the ell, discussing the situation, when a bright thought suddenly occurred to Raymond. He remembered that the window in his room was open, for Grandmother Benson firmly believed in giving sleeping apartments an abundance of pure air. The ladder which he and Byer had used in their visit to the Griffin homestead, and which they had taken turns in lugging home, now served another purpose. By its aid the two "sperits" who had exerted such a magic influence upon Noah Griffin,

were soon snoring soundly between the warm blankets of the bed in Raymond's den.

A few days later Raymond was awakened in the small hours of the morning by a noise in the stable. He and Byer hastened out to see what the trouble was, and discovered one of the horses cast in his stall. After a good deal of work they succeeded in getting him on his feet again. As they were passing from the stable to the ell of the house, in returning to their room, Raymond caught a glimpse of some one dodging behind the barn. Hastily telling Byer what he had seen, and leaving him to watch, he rushed to the shed and seized a single-barreled shot-gun which hung there, and which had been heavily loaded with double-B shot for the benefit of a hawk that had made occasional raids upon the poultry. Thus armed he hastened towards the barn, Byer accompanying him with the lantern. As they reached the yard a sheet of flame shot up from the corner of the great building, and by its light two men were seen running in the direction of the cedar swamp.

"What ye doing?" yelled Byer.

"Halt! Hold on there!" shouted Raymond. "Stop, or I'll shoot," he added, warningly.

Neither of the men paid any attention to this challenge. In a moment Raymond's gun was at his shoulder, and a sharp report rang out upon the night.

"I've hit one, sure's the world, Byer," he cried, exultingly, as the smoke cleared away, "but we can't follow him now. Go into the tie-up and let out the

cattle. The haymows are on fire, and we can't save the building."

Byer hastened to do as directed, and soon the cattle came rushing into the yard, bellowing with fright. In a few moments the great building was one vast, roaring mass of flame, and when Dud and Mr. and Mrs. Benson arrived on the scene it lit up the whole country for miles around with its lurid glare.

Fortunately the barn stood a good distance from the other buildings, and there was no wind, otherwise all would doubtless have gone. The great sparks and cinders flew about in the draught created by the intense heat, and many of them fell upon the other buildings. It required the most unceasing vigilance to keep them from accomplishing still further destruction.

Very soon the neighbors began to flock in from every direction. In a short time a large number of people were on the ground. A bucket brigade was formed from the brook to the house, which, together with the neighboring outbuildings, was thoroughly wet down. But no attempt was made to save the barn. Any such effort would have been useless, for it was a veritable tinder-box, built as it was of old-growth pine and filled with hay and straw.

While Grandfather Benson and the neighbors were looking after the house and surrounding buildings, Raymond and Byer hastened in the direction of the swamp to look for the firebug who had been shot. After a careful search they discovered him in a clump of alder

bushes, on the edge of the timber, where he had evidently crawled for concealment, though the blood-stained track he had left behind him would have speedily revealed his hiding-place. He was a dark-skinned man about forty years of age. His clothing had been patched so many times that it was difficult to tell what had been the original texture. There was an ugly-looking wound in his hip, from which the blood flowed profusely. He was evidently suffering intense pain, but he gritted his teeth in a savage attempt to stifle the groans that were on his lips. It was plain that he did not purpose to show any weakness in the presence of his pursuers.

"Mon Dieu! You ban keeled me," he groaned fiercely, as the boys bent over him.

"Nonsense," responded Raymond. "You are very far from being a corpse yet. A dead man wouldn't have so much voice and venom."

"It would be your own fault if you should die," added Byer. "We didn't cause you to burn that barn. That's a pretty hard crime, and will give you lots to think about before you're through with it. The punishment for arson is the same as for murder in this State—imprisonment at hard labor for life."

The wounded man remained sullenly silent, evidently feeling that this was the wisest course to pursue.

"He's suffering too much to care about that now, Byer," said Raymond. "Where did old Pete go?" he added abruptly to the incendiary.

"Down in—Ba cripe! Wat I ban say? Dere ban no Pete wit' me. Mon Dieu! I tole you true."

"What's the use of lying?" said Raymond, impatiently. "You started out to tell the truth, and you had better do it. There is nothing to be gained by concealment. Old Pete Atkins was with you. He was the one who hired you to help him in this job."

The wounded man made no reply, but gritted his teeth and closed his lips firmly together. He was evidently afraid to open his mouth lest something should escape that ought not to. Byer remained with him while Raymond went for some of the neighbors and an old mattress, upon which the man was borne to Mr. Benson's house. His arrival created no little excitement among the people there. They crowded about him as he lay in the center of the big kitchen floor, but none of them recognized him. He was a stranger to all. The looks that were given him were far from friendly. Some of the hot-bloods made open talk of lynching him, while many of the cooler heads thought that he should be immediately taken to Bolton and lodged in jail. Among those who inclined to the latter opinion were Mr. Grover and Dean Perrin.

"It's no use t' take any chances with such fellows, Andrew," insisted the latter. "I tell ye they're wuss'n pisen. They're allus turnin' up when we git by the rust an' rot, t' destroy our property an' make it harder'n ever t' pay our taxes."

"I shouldn't keep him here an hour if I were in your

place, Andrew," said Mr. Grover, emphatically, and it was evident that his view of the matter was the one generally entertained by the crowd.

"I can't send him away now, neighbors," said Grandfather Benson, slowly. "The man is dangerously shot and at my door. It makes no difference what he has done to me and mine, it is my duty to take Christian care of him, and not act the part of a heathen. When he is fully able to stand the journey we will take him to Bolton—not before. Dud, I wish you would take the bay mare and go after Dr. Lemons. Fix up the bed in the spare-room, mother, and we'll see that this man is well cared for. Perhaps you had better get some bandages ready for the doctor when he comes."

The neighbors offered no further objections, though the opinion was freely expressed among them on the way home that not one man in a thousand would have acted that way towards a man who had burned his barn, and that if there was ever a truly Christian man in town it was Uncle Andrew Benson.

Dr. Lemons pronounced the injury of the incendiary to be by no means a fatal one. He found his patient weak from loss of blood, but, after he had carefully dressed the wound, he expressed the opinion that the man could be safely moved to Bolton inside of a week.

"The hay is the worst loss," said Grandfather Benson to Raymond that evening as they stood by the charred ruins which the fire had left. "The barn itself was fairly well insured, and you and Byer were able to save

the stock. All my grain was threshed and in the bins of the stable. After all, we have reason to be thankful that we escaped so easily."

"I wish it had been old Pete I shot instead of his confederate."

"Peter who?"—Grandfather Benson never used nicknames.

"Atkins."

"What of him?"

"Why, he is the one who set that barn afire."

"That is a very serious charge to bring against a fellow townsman."

"But I know it was he," and thereupon Raymond related the circumstances under which he had shot Pete's dog, the angry threats the rumseller had indulged in, and the half admission that the wounded man had made in the swamp to him and Byer.

Grandfather Benson listened to his story with evident surprise and interest. "I wish I had known of these things before," he said, thoughtfully.

"I know I ought to have told you," said Raymond, regretfully, "but I was afraid you and grandmother would worry about it."

"Perhaps we might, my boy, but it would have lifted a load from your shoulders. You musn't try to bear such burdens all alone."

"I'm to blame for all this, grandfather," said Raymond, impulsively.

"Don't feel that way, my boy," was the kindly

response. "I'm sorry you were so hasty in shooting, although under the circumstances the law would probably uphold you. I don't blame you at all for standing your ground against Atkins; you couldn't very well have done otherwise. If the fellow in the house gets well and is punished, together with his confederates, I shall think that what has been our small loss has been the town's great gain. I should not like to think you had taken the life of a fellow man, even though you detected him in the commission of a capital crime."

"You use me a good deal better than I deserve, grandfather," said Raymond, earnestly, "and—and—" he paused and choked a little.

"You're all done out, boy. This excitement has been too much for you," kindly interposed Mr. Benson.

"No—I think not. I guess I'm a little nervous—that's all," returned Raymond. "In my opinion old Pete Atkins is near the end of his rope. I shall do all I can to hurry him along," he added, earnestly, as he went to his room to catch a little sleep after the excitements of the day.

CHAPTER XVII

AN ADVENTURE WITH LYNXES

“Hello, Raymond, what in the world are you doing here?”

It was Ned Grover who asked this question, and as he spoke he threw down a number of steel traps from his shoulder, and seated himself upon the stump of a large fir which his friend had just cut down near his camp in the swamp.

“I’m making sap troughs.”

“Sap troughs? Where do you expect to use them?”

“Right here on this farm.”

“I don’t see where you’ll find maples enough.”

“I’ll not, in one place, but by taking them all about the farm I think I can find fully four hundred that will do to tap. I expect to do quite a business from them next spring.”

“It will be lots of work collecting the sap, won’t it?”

“Yes, but I sha’n’t mind that. You see, it will come at that season of the year when we’ve little else to do. I shall have plenty of time, and can attend to it without any trouble.”

“Where will you boil the sap down?”

“In the shed. I’m going to have those two large

farmers' boilers for evaporators. Besides those, I shall have a small kettle on the kitchen stove to syrup off in. I'm inclined to think I shall not make much of any sugar. It will take too much time."

"That's a good idea. What will you do with your syrup?"

"Sell it."

"Well, I guess you won't have any trouble in doing that. It's strange that more farmers don't go into the business in this county."

"It has been a surprise to me, too. In Vermont or New Hampshire a good farm would hardly be considered complete without its sap orchard, with its sap-house right in the midst of the trees. They use large, shallow pans there for evaporators, and have many ingenious devices for collecting the sap."

"It seems to me that you are starting on your operations pretty early. It's a long time yet before spring."

"I know it, but it's going to be considerable of a task to cut all my troughs and get my spiles ready. Besides, I may not be able to work at it for weeks at a time. Where are you going with those traps?"

"Down where the old horse was carried. The lynxes and foxes have been holding high carnival there. I've had five or six traps set there for the past three days. I'm going to take a look at them and set some more."

"I'm a good mind to go with you," said Raymond, casting a longing look at his shot-gun which leaned against a near-by tree.

"Come on!" cried Ned, eagerly. "You'll have time enough to cut all the sap troughs you'll need before spring."

The invitation was too tempting to be refused, and, with a sigh of relief, Raymond laid down the axe and picked up his gun.

"What's it loaded with?" asked Ned, as Raymond turned to follow him.

"Bird-shot. I didn't know but that I might see a partridge."

"Have you any buck-shot?"

"Yes. I brought some along in my coat-pocket."

"Well, I guess you'd better drop a few in one of the barrels. We might start a fox or a lynx."

"Or a bear," added Raymond, as he acted upon his friend's suggestion. "Do you remember the first one we ever saw?" he continued, with a laugh.

"Well, I rather guess I do," was Ned's smiling response.

"Didn't I feel cheap, though! I remember how you and I discussed the chances of meeting a bear when we started out partridge hunting on your grandfather's back lot that morning. You were going to try your hand at mounting it after we'd killed it, and then we were going to sell it to some museum or dime show. We both agreed that there would be money in it."

"Yes," said Raymond, "and you remember that we even went so far as to plan just what we'd do with the money."

"Going to buy a canoe with it, I believe," interposed Ned. "Whatever our scheme was, I remember that we were right in the midst of the details when what should we see just over the brow of the ridge but a real, live bear. My, but didn't he look big?"

"Three sizes larger than an elephant," assented Raymond.

"Weren't we frightened boys, though?" continued Ned. "I fancied I could feel every hair on my head stand on end. The cold chills ran down my back-bone, and it seemed to me that I could feel my heart pound against my ribs. I wheeled around and started for home without taking the gun—the only one we had—off my shoulder. I reckon I never ran quite so hard in my life, and you were not very far behind."

"No," confessed Raymond. "I guess I wasn't. When I got down near the main road I mustered up courage enough to throw a look over my shoulder, and found, to my relief, that the bear wasn't following. I imagine he may have been going in the opposite direction at a rate of speed equal to ours. When I found he wasn't in sight I began to grow bold, and coming up, breathless and panting, to where you were waiting on the bars for me I demanded to know, in tones of lofty indignation, why you had run away with the gun just as I was getting ready to shoot that bear?"

"You bet that made me hot," said Ned, with a grin.

"But you didn't take the bluff, though," continued Raymond. "You gave me a disgusted look and coolly

remarked, 'Shucks! What's the use o' talking. You know you were just as scared as I was.' You had me right by the hair there, and I didn't undertake to deny it."

"Wouldn't Allen Webster like to know about that affair?" said Ned. "He'd use it for an offset to the scare you gave him up on Ezra Johnston's back lot."

"It would be just nuts for him," admitted Raymond, "but fortunately you and I were the only witnesses to that affair."

"Except the bear," corrected Ned.

"Oh yes, the bear," laughed Raymond, "but he won't tell."

"Oh, I saw Sam Brown this afternoon," exclaimed Ned, suddenly, as if the fact had just occurred to him. "He was on his way home from Bolton; saw your fire-bug there, and says he's the very same man that was with Pete Atkins when he and his cousin saw them at Amos Dole's old camp on Bower Brook."

"I had suspected that," was Raymond's comment. "I have no doubt he is the fellow who has helped Pete in his smuggling operations. They were probably on their way back from one of their trips over the line when Sam saw them."

"I guess there's no doubt of that."

"I'm glad to learn of Sam's visit to the jail," continued Raymond. "It furnishes me with an important piece of testimony."

"Well, I hope you may get enough to drive old Pete

out of town. It would be the very best thing that could happen for Chestnut," said Ned.

A little later the boys, who had been talking as they walked, reached a small, open place in the swamp where fire-wood had been cut the previous winter, in the center of which was the carcass of a horse.

"Whew!" exclaimed Raymond, pinching his nose with his fingers. "Beginning to get a little loud, isn't he?"

"Talking right out in meeting," admitted Ned. "He was all right, though, until the last thaw came along."

"His odor doesn't appear to trouble the lynxes and foxes," continued Raymond. "See where they've gnawed on him."

"Yes, confound them!" laughed Ned, a little ruefully, "and see how gingerly they've stepped around my traps. Do you imagine they scented them?"

"No. I guess it was merely their good luck. You'll get some of them yet," said Raymond, encouragingly. "Bur-r-r!" he added, with a shiver, as the cold wind swayed the tree-tops, and whistled dismally away with a burden of dead leaves and moss. "This is beginning to feel a good deal like winter."

"Say!" exclaimed Ned, with a burst of inspiration, "that wind comes just right. Let's hide behind that old cedar windfall, and keep an eye on the old horse. We shall be to the windward of any fox or lynx coming up on the other side."

Raymond readily acceded to this suggestion, and presently the boys were comfortably ensconced behind the big windfall, with the shot-gun resting over its moss-grown top in readiness for instant use.

Their patience was not destined to be put to a severe test. They had lain in their place of concealment but a short time before a shaggy, catlike head, with tasseled ears, emerged from a brush-heap at the edge of the chopping, and two gleaming yellow eyes looked cautiously about the clearing. Evidently satisfied that all was well, the lynx, one of the largest of its species, stealthily approached the carcass of the horse. He had crept but a short distance into the open, however, before he paused, turned his head in the direction from which he had come, and gave vent to a low, ominous growl. This was almost immediately answered by a vicious snarl, and another lynx, fully as large as the first, bounded into the clearing.

For a moment the two big cats glared at each other with savage hostility, lashing their tails and giving vent to their rage in a series of fierce growls, as they circled cautiously about each other. Their lithe bodies and quick, sinuous movements fascinated Raymond and Ned, who had never before witnessed such a spectacle.

It was evident that each of the big cats was endeavoring to get his antagonist at a disadvantage. Finally one of them made a mad leap at the other's throat, and in a moment they were rolling about on the ground, two kicking, biting, clawing, hissing demons that threw

off bits of fur, like sparks from a dynamo, and filled the woods with their frightful growls, and shrill, piercing yawls.

Over and over they rolled, first one seeming to have the advantage and then the other, until they brought up, in their death-grip, against the body of the old horse. Suddenly there came a quick, ringing click, and one of the cats gave voice to a blood-curdling scream of rage and pain, louder and fiercer than any that had preceded it. The noise of the closing trap startled the lynx that was free, and releasing his hold upon his enemy he sprang away, spitting and growling in a passion of rage.

At this moment there came the sharp report of a gun, and the big cat sprang convulsively into the air, and fell limply to the ground.

"Hurrah, Ned!" shouted Raymond, as they rushed from their place of concealment. "We've got 'em both."

"Look out! Look out, I tell you!" cried Ned, sharply. "He's alive yet, and chuck full of fight."

The warning was a timely one. The big lynx had leaped to its feet, the blood streaming through its coarse hair from a wicked wound along the top of its head, and its big, bloodshot eyes blazing with fury.

Ned's warning cry seemed to arouse the big cat to action. With a shrill scream, he made in the direction of the sound. Raymond endeavored to stop him with the other barrel of his gun, but the fine bird-shot seemed

only further to infuriate him. Ned was just bounding over the big windfall when the lynx overtook him, sinking his forward claws in the thick folds of his heavy hunting-coat. There was a sound of ripping canvas, and Ned pitched forward upon all fours, while the lynx fell back, spitting and snarling, upon the other side of the log. Dazed and maddened with pain, the big cat was about to renew the attack, when Raymond reached him and laid him flat with a vigorous blow from his clubbed gun.

"Didn't have time to load," he panted, as Ned rose slowly to his feet, and with face ghastly white stood looking at him in open-mouthed bewilderment.

"Good job! Of course you didn't," gasped Ned. "Is—is he dead?"

"As a door-nail," declared Raymond, confidently.

"Whew! but that was a mighty close shave," puffed Ned. "He meant me all right."

"Did he scratch you?" asked Raymond, anxiously.

"No, but if it hadn't been for my chamois-skin undervest he'd certainly have left his trade-mark on me. I could feel his hot breath when I was jumping over that windfall."

A deep, hissing growl called their attention to the lynx in the trap. The massive jaws had caught him by a hind leg, and were holding him fast. He was squirming about on the ground, snarling and snapping his teeth, in a frantic attempt to escape from his predicament.

"Better load up and put him out of his misery," suggested Ned.

"I can't," said Raymond, holding up his gun. "The stock is splintered."

"Too bad," said Ned, regretfully, "but you can get Cobe Hersom to make you another."

"I was glad to contribute that much to the cause," laughed Raymond.

"I was the one who needed it in my business," said Ned. "In fact, I don't see just how I could have got along without it. I shall expect to pay for a new one."

"I'd like to see you do it," protested Raymond, indignantly.

"Well, we won't argue that now," said Ned. "The question at present before the meeting-house is what we are going to kill that lynx with?"

"Here's something that will answer the purpose, I guess," replied Raymond, as he pulled a maple sled-stake from a pile of dead leaves.

"Let me do this one," cried Ned, eagerly. "That will make us even."

"All right," assented Raymond, good-naturedly, handing him the stake.

Ned approached the lynx in the trap with great caution, and, after several ineffectual attempts, succeeded in killing it with a sharp blow across the head.

"Hurrah!" shouted Raymond, exultantly. "The world—"

"And a couple of lynxes," interposed Ned.

"Are ours," concluded Raymond. "Battle-scarred and veteran trapper of Aroostook, let me congratulate you on being alive."

"Thanks!" grinned Ned. "I won't deny that it feels good."

The boys stretched the two lynxes out on a bed of moss and looked at them admiringly.

"I'm going to mount them both, Ned," said Raymond. "Take your choice, old boy. You're entitled to it."

"There isn't any," declared Ned. "I don't see but that one's about as good as the other."

"I guess I'll let you have the one that was in the trap, Ned. I think he'll mount a little better."

"I wouldn't have him, old boy, if I thought there was any great difference," asserted Ned, and a few moments later they were on their way home, each with a lynx slung over his shoulder, thoroughly satisfied with themselves and their afternoon's work.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FAMOUS ARSON TRIAL

Grandfather Benson said very little at supper-time when Raymond told him what Ned had said in reference to Sam Brown's discovery regarding the firebug in Bolton jail, but the next day a warrant was sworn out against Pete Atkins on charge of arson, and before night he was occupying quarters near his partner in the Bolton jail.

It was a week later when the trial of the two men came off. Two of the ablest lawyers in Bolton had been engaged to defend the prisoners, and the case attracted wide attention.

Considerable time was employed in empaneling a jury. The counsel for the defense peremptorily challenged two men who lived in the town of Bodge, which adjoined Chestnut, and the county attorney exercised the same privilege in the case of two men who were supposed to be connected, directly or indirectly, with the liquor traffic.

"Joel Webber," called the clerk, as he drew a name from the box to fill the last place upon the panel. The attorney for the defense jumped quickly to his feet.

"I challenge this man for cause, Your Honor," he

said. "I am informed that he has already expressed an opinion on the cause in hearing."

"Have you ever expressed an opinion upon the pending cause, Mr. Webber?" asked the judge.

"Well, I don't exactly know whether I have or not," returned Joel, slowly. "I've expressed my opinion of Mr. Atkins quite a number of times—if that's what you mean."

A titter ran about the court-house at this announcement, which was sternly repressed by the sheriff.

"You are excused, Mr. Webber," said the judge.

The next man to be drawn was permitted to serve without objection, and the trial proceeded without further delay.

Against the first man, who gave his name as Jean Gambier, and his native place as Montreal, the evidence was conclusive. His counsel made little attempt at defense, but confined themselves to an effort to secure a light sentence, upon the ground that their client was not the principal in the crime, but that he was in fact merely the tool of some stronger man who had planned the affair and himself applied the torch. It is possible that they might have met with some degree of success if their client had revealed the name of his accomplice. But this he stubbornly refused to do. As a result he was not successful in securing any sympathy. The direct testimony of Raymond and Byer Ames told heavily against him, and he was given the full penalty of the law.

The people of Chestnut were very much interested in the trial of Pete Atkins, and a number of them were in attendance at the court-house when his case came up.

Byer testified to seeing two men run from the fire. One of them he identified as Gambier. The other he believed to be Atkins, but did not get a fair look at his face, and would not be willing to swear positively as to his identity. He related at length the facts connected with the discovery of Gambier on the night of the fire. After a brief cross-examination he was excused, and Raymond took the stand. His direct testimony was simply a corroboration of Byer's with the exception that he positively identified Atkins as the second incendiary. At its close the leading attorney for Atkins, a sharp, incisive man, began a cross-examination.

"How long have you known Mr. Atkins?"

"About six years."

"When did you last have any conversation with him prior to the fire?"

"About two weeks before."

"Where?"

"In the road on Bent Hill."

"How far is that from your home?"

"About a mile."

"Were you alone at the time?"

"Yes."

"On that occasion did you shoot a dog belonging to Mr. Atkins?"

" I did."

" And this led to some angry words between you, did it not? "

" Yes."

" Mr. Atkins was naturally incensed at the killing of the valuable dog and threatened to whip you, did he not? "

" He did."

" Did he approach you with that evident purpose? "

" Yes."

" What did you do? "

" I told him not to try it."

" Did you point your gun at him? "

" No, sir."

" You are quite sure of that? "

" Yes, sir."

" Did you tell him that you would shoot him if he struck you? "

" Yes."

" You were thoroughly mad, were you not? "

" Yes, sir."

" What did Mr. Atkins do when you told him you'd shoot if he struck you? "

" He got into his wagon and drove off."

" You have had a grudge against him ever since then, have you not? "

" No, sir. I had no reason to. He didn't touch me."

" You entertain bitter feelings concerning the affair, do you not? "

"The memory of it is not a pleasant one."

"Precisely. In other words, you are an enemy to Atkins."

"Not exactly. I am not one of his friends, rather."

"That will do, sir," said the lawyer, with the air of a man who had won most important concessions from the witness.

"One moment," said the county attorney, as Raymond was about to step from the stand. "Had you ever had any trouble with Atkins prior to the night you shot his dog?"

"No, sir. None whatever."

"Did you do anything to provoke his dog?"

"No, sir. The dog ran up and seized me by the leg. That was the first I saw of it, and I had said nothing whatever to it."

"You naturally object to being bitten by any man's dog, do you not?"

"I do, certainly."

"Did you know when the dog seized you that it belonged to Atkins?"

"I did not."

"So your treatment of it had no connection with the ownership?"

"None whatever."

"You would have done the same whoever owned it?"

"I should, certainly."

"Did Atkins make any threats?"

"Yes, sir."

"What were they?"

"He said I would wish I had steered clear of him. When I told him I didn't fear him, he said the time might come when I would sing a different tune."

"What was his attitude at the time?"

"He looked very angry and shook his whip at me."

"That will do, sir," said the county attorney to Raymond, with a triumphant nod that was very evidently intended to impress the testimony on the minds of the jury.

At the request of the counsel for the defense, Byer Ames was recalled.

"You stated, did you not," asked the sharp-faced attorney, "that you were unable to see the face of Gambier's companion on the night of the fire?"

"Yes, sir."

"You thought it was Atkins, but would not be willing to swear to it?"

"No. I would not be positive about it."

"What led you to think the man was Atkins?"

"His general appearance."

"But you stated to the court that you could not swear to his identity."

"That is true. I cannot."

"Now just reflect a moment. Was not the idea that the man was Atkins first suggested to you by young Benson?"

"I do not remember."

"Did he not cry out 'That's Pete Atkins,' or words to that effect?"

"I do not recollect. I don't think he did, but I was too much excited at the time to recall now just what was said."

"He said something to you, did he not?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure."

"You do not remember what it was?"

"I do not."

"Wasn't the occurrence of such a startling nature as would naturally fix the events in your mind?"

"Yes, sir, the events, but not the conversation connected with them."

"You would not be willing to say that young Benson didn't suggest to you that it was Atkins, would you?"

"No, sir."

The lawyer turned towards the jury with an insinuating smile that was intended to convey the opinion that the witness was unwilling to tell all he knew.

"One moment, if you please," said the county attorney, as Byer was about to leave the stand.

"When did you first know of Raymond Benson's trouble with Atkins?"

"When he told it here in court."

"He has never said anything to you personally regarding it, has he?"

"Not a word."

"That is all," said the attorney, and Byer stepped from the stand with a sigh of relief.

Pete Atkins then took the stand in his own behalf, and told a very straightforward story.

He had not been absent from home on the night of the fire. He was not acquainted with Gambier at that time. In fact he never set eyes on him before he became acquainted with him in the Bolton jail during the brief period he was incarcerated there before obtaining bail.

The wife and sons of Atkins corroborated his testimony as to his being at home on the night of the fire. Their testimony was further strengthened by that of the hired man, who swore that he had attended a dance at Chestnut Corner on the night of the fire; that he had returned home at two o'clock in the morning, and that Mr. Atkins had got out of bed to open the door for him.

An attempt was made by the county attorney at recess to persuade Gambier to turn State's evidence, but he stoutly maintained that he had never seen Atkins until he met him in Bolton jail, prior to the trial, and that he knew nothing whatever concerning him.

When the court came in again Sam Brown was called in rebuttal. He positively identified Gambier as the man whom he had seen with Pete Atkins a year before at Amos Dole's camp on Bower Brook. His story of the circumstances under which the meeting occurred created a decided sensation in the court-room, and for the first time during the trial Pete Atkins looked troubled, and hitched about uneasily in his chair.

One of the deputy collectors at the Custom-House

had stepped into the room for a moment, and it was evident that he was much interested in this testimony. Atkins had long been suspected of robbing Uncle Sam of a large amount of custom duties, but the government officials, though they had tried a number of times, had never been able to fasten the crime upon him.

A vigorous cross-examination failed to shake in the least Sam's direct testimony, and when he left the stand the case looked considerably darker for the defense.

The prosecuting officer then introduced a large amount of evidence from Chestnut people to show the poor reputation of Atkins in that community for truth and veracity.

It was very evident that Pete found this evidence exceedingly galling. Two or three times he half rose from his chair, and, but for a warning gesture from his lawyer, would probably have indulged in vigorous condemnation of the witnesses.

Several times he excitedly leaned forward and held a whispered consultation with his attorney.

"By gum, I reckon some on us 'll have t' take up," whispered Dean Perrin to Raymond, who sat just in front of him.

"What do you mean?" asked Raymond, who had been following this part of the case with a great deal of secret satisfaction.

"Thet old rascal 'll lay for the whole on us. He'll make it cost us dear," returned Dean, dolefully.

"I guess not," was Raymond's encouraging answer.

"He's got about all the troubles he cares for just now. I fancy he'll lie low for a time."

"Mebbe so," said Dean, doubtfully. "He's an awful active critter though, an' I reckon es how he'll be up to his old tricks agin arter a spell."

"If he does we'll make it mighty interesting for him," declared Raymond, confidently.

The impeachment testimony was the last to be submitted.

The senior counsel for the defense then addressed the jury. He was a man of sonorous voice, a consummate actor, and a most plausible speaker. He reviewed the case at length, with every appearance of candor and fairness.

He had not advanced far with his argument, however, before Raymond perceived that his effectiveness was full more in what he insinuated than in what he said. Raymond's face grew hot with indignation again and again, as the crafty fellow managed to convey the impression, without making any charges, that he was a boy in whose word very little dependence could be put, and that, back of him, was a record that would scarcely bear investigation.

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNEXPECTED VERDICT

At the opening of his argument the counsel for the defense assumed a tone of great solemnity. He was evidently impressed by the gravity of the issue, and spoke with every appearance of deep feeling.

He reminded the jury that the case before them was one of grave importance. The prisoner at the bar was on trial for a crime that was accorded the severest penalty known to the law of the state. There was no fault to be found with this provision. The crime of arson was a most heinous one, and deserved the most stringent punishment. It was necessary for the safety of life and property that the laws should so provide. But because of the very grave nature of this crime, and the severity of the penalty attaching to it, there was all the more reason why an intelligent and impartial jury should exercise the greatest consideration before fixing so great a stigma upon a fellow man, and condemning him to a living death for the rest of his natural life. None but the most direct and positive evidence should be allowed the slightest weight in such a case.

Certainly such a grave responsibility as this was not to be lightly exercised. Upon what, then, did the case

against his client rest? What direct and positive testimony had been adduced to show that he had burned Andrew Benson's barn? Not a particle. The principal witness in the prosecution of Mr. Atkins was a boy who had been shown to have a personal grudge against him, growing out of a quarrel between the two over the killing of the prisoner's dog. It might have been that Mr. Atkins had made use of strong language upon that occasion. There was nothing surprising in that. Few men would tamely submit to the wanton killing of a favorite and valuable dog by an irresponsible boy. There was nothing but the boy's word to show that the dog had bitten him, and what reliance was to be placed on that? The jury had seen the boy upon the stand. He was confident that they had not failed to form a correct estimate of his character.

Entertaining a bitter, personal grudge against Atkins, young Benson was quick to detect, in the burning of his grandfather's barn, an opportunity for revenge. With this in mind he had artfully suggested to Ames the name of the prisoner at the bar as the second incendiary, a suggestion that in the darkness and excitement found a ready credence.

Of what real importance had been the testimony of young Brown? It had simply tended to show that Gambier and Atkins had once been seen together more than a year before. There was nothing very damaging in this, even if it were true. But there was the strongest reason to believe that this had been a case of mistaken

identity. Both Gambier and Atkins positively denied that they had ever seen each other before they met at the Bolton jail. A year was a long time, and it was an easy thing for a boy like Brown to be mistaken in a case of identity where the meeting occurred so far back.

Citizens of Chestnut had been brought in by the prosecution to impeach Atkins's reputation for veracity, but in nearly every instance cross-examination had revealed the fact that they cherished personal animosity against the prisoner. Clearly such evidence was not of a reliable character, and should not be permitted to convict any man of so terrible a crime. The wife and sons of Atkins had fully established an alibi for him by showing that he was not absent from home at all on the night of the fire. This evidence was substantiated by the direct testimony of Donald Green, the hired man, who returned at half past two from a dance at Chestnut Corner and had been admitted to the house by Atkins himself, who got up out of bed for that purpose.

The defense then closed with a strong appeal to the jury to exclude every particle of testimony that was tainted with personal malice, and to deal with the prisoner in an impartial spirit of fairness and justice.

It was evident that the plea of the defense had made a deep impression upon the minds of the jury, and all eyes were turned expectantly upon the county attorney when he rose to make the closing argument. He spoke, in opening, of the terrible crime of arson; one that

frequently destroyed not only valuable property, but human life. With the firebug abroad in the land, who could feel safe when he retired for the night? Criminals of this class gave no thought to their victims. Strong men might be able to escape the terrors of the flames, but what a fate awaited the helpless women and children, suffocated with smoke, and unable to get out of the burning homes which incendiarism had converted into funeral pyres. It was very well for society's sake that the law dealt severely with such criminals; otherwise who would be safe? It was the solemn duty of those charged with the administration of justice to see that such men did not escape when once they came within the strong clutches of the law, but that the full measure of punishment was meted out to them. It would be impossible to conceive of a much stronger case than that against Atkins. Notwithstanding the assertion of the prisoner that he had never seen Gambier until he met him in the Bolton jail, the positive testimony of young Brown had established the fact that these two men had been seen together more than a year before the burning of Mr. Benson's barn.

"They were evidently confederates, and," he continued, "the mysterious sacks which they carried at the time young Brown saw them might very likely have furnished interesting facts for the custom—"

"One moment!" interposed the senior counsel for the defense, sharply. "The county attorney is deliberately and knowingly violating the rules of argument,

and attempting, by insinuation, to convey impressions not based upon evidence, and as to which no evidence would be admissible. I ask Your Honor to instruct the jury to utterly disregard this language."

"I think the objection is well taken," said the judge. "The jury may disregard the language in question. Mr. County Attorney, you must be careful not to travel in argument beyond the evidence in the case."

"I beg the pardon of the Court," said the county attorney, blandly, "if I have transgressed the rules of argument. I thank my learned brother for calling my attention to the inadvertence. I will endeavor, hereafter, in commenting upon the prisoners at the bar, to confine myself strictly to the crime with which they are charged."

The county attorney turned again to the jury, but, as he did so, Raymond fancied that he saw a look of quiet satisfaction on his face that was not wholly in keeping with the contrite form of his apology. The point which he had desired to impress had gone home to the jury, and the interruption of the counsel for the defense had only served to emphasize it.

There was no blame attached to Raymond Benson for shooting Atkins's dog, declared the county attorney, resuming his argument. The act was purely one of self-defense, and was done without any knowledge whatever of the ownership of the dog. It appeared from the evidence that Atkins had worked himself into a terrible rage over this affair, and had fiercely threatened

young Benson with vengeance. That vengeance had come soon after in the burning of Andrew Benson's barn. It was a strange, unreasoning retaliation; but the testimony of a number of the best-known and most-respected citizens of Chestnut had shown that Atkins was of just the calibre to resort to such a method of satiating his malice. Atkins had been positively identified by Raymond Benson, who had seen him in the light of the burning barn running towards the swamp. This testimony was corroborated by Ames, who saw the man and believed him to be Atkins.

The attempt of the defense to establish an alibi had been painfully weak. The testimony had been furnished by the immediate members of the prisoner's family, all but one of whom were impelled by the strongest motives of self-interest to save him, if possible, from the just consequences of his crime. The testimony of such interested parties should not be permitted to have weight. It deserved none. Much less should it be allowed to weigh against the direct and unimpeachable evidence that positively connected the prisoner with this terrible crime. The county attorney closed with a strong plea to the jury to do their full duty, and thus add to the protection of society by visiting upon Atkins the severe penalty of his crime, thereby deterring others from following in his footsteps.

There was a profound silence in the court-room at the close of this plea. In a few words the judge charged the jury, reviewing briefly the points of law

involved in the case, and urging them to return an impartial verdict. It was more than an hour after they left the court-room before they returned, and there was a painful stillness when the clerk inquired:

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

"We have," responded the foreman.

"Are the prisoners guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty as to Gambier; not guilty as to Atkins."

An angry murmur of surprise and disappointment ran around the room. It was apparent that the verdict was wholly unexpected. The evidence had been so strong against Atkins that his conviction was confidently and generally looked for.

The county attorney subsequently moved for sentence in case of Gambier, and he was sent to the State Prison at Thomaston for life.

"It's no use trying to get justice in that court," said Raymond, bitterly, to his Grandfather Benson, as they drove home after the trial.

"Of course we are disappointed, my boy," was the response, "but very likely we are not able to take the impartial view of the case that disinterested people are. Matters certainly looked differently to the jury than they do to us."

"Yes, that's apparent. There was evidence enough there to have convinced an average jury of Hottentots that Pete Atkins burned our barn. I never saw twelve such lunkheads as were on that jury collected together

in one group before. I tell you, it is a sad thing for justice when the administration of it is left in such hands. There is something wrong about the jury system, anyway. Scarcely a day passes that we do not hear of some knave escaping his just deserts through the failure of jurymen to do their duty."

"There is no doubt that justice frequently miscarries," said Mr. Benson, slowly. "Men are by no means infallible in framing or administering laws. Still we owe a great deal to that wise provision which secures to every man charged with crime a fair, free trial before a jury of his peers. If you feel inclined to question this, compare our methods of conducting a trial with those in vogue in China, where the judge is supreme, and his one mind determines the life or death of the culprits that are tried before him. It is impossible that such a system can be in any true sense a judicial one. It is not surprising to read, in such cases, that courts of justice are also halls of torture."

"Perhaps you are right," said Raymond, "but I should feel humiliated to think that the men on that jury are my peers. Now that old Pete Atkins is out of limbo we shall have to be on the lookout for more mischief from him."

"I do not think he will trouble us further," said Mr. Benson.

"You don't suppose a man of his revengeful nature will forget or forgive the raking over we gave him in court, do you?"

"Probably not, but although Peter is a knave, he is by no means a fool. Public attention has been pretty generally centered upon him, by this trial, and he knows very well that if he should come before the court again he would be almost certain to go to Thomaston for a long term of years in the State Prison there. No, I will venture to say that, aside from his smuggling operations, he will have sense enough to keep very quiet for a while."

"I guess you're right," answered Raymond. "I hadn't thought of that."

"How did it go?" asked Dean Perrin, coming down the road to meet them as they passed his house.

"Gambier was convicted," responded Mr. Benson.

"And old Pete?"

"He was acquitted."

"Acquitted! Wal, I swan, I thought there would be evidence enough agin 'im t' jug 'im for life. I tell ye it's a mighty hard world for a man who is poor an' honest," growled the misanthrope, dolefully. "The villain thet burns barns an' smuggles liquor across the line goes free from the courts o' justice t' prosper an' git rich through his knavery, while those on us who endeavor t' live soberly an' honestly have t' scratch early an' late t' keep body an' soul together, an' git money enough t' pay our taxes."

"Ah well, Dean," said Mr. Benson, soothingly, "you know the Holy Word tells us that a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches. About all that

any of us can hope to get out of this life is what we eat and drink and wear. A contented man is never poor."

"I've hearn thet sort o' talk afore, Andrew," said Dean, with a mournful shake of his head. "It's true, I'll allow, thet about all any on us can git out o' this world is a livin', but I tell ye there's a pesky sight o' difference in what men consider a livin'."

"That may be, Dean," admitted Mr. Benson, "but if a man is satisfied with his own lot, he will have no reason to feel envious of his neighbors."

"Mebbe not," responded Mr. Perrin, doubtfully. "We can't square our lives by maxims, though. I declare I felt so sure thet the town was goin' t' git rid o' old Pete Atkins thet I'm clean down at the heel. Howsumever," he added, as Mr. Benson and Raymond drove away, "there's a jumpin' off place t' most everything, an' the day's sartin sure t' come when thet ole scamp 'll find himself at the end o' his rope. The people o' this town are just beginnin' t' wake up. When we all pull together it'll be the end o' the rum business here in Chestnut."

CHAPTER XX

WHAT FOLLOWED THE TRIAL

"Dean Perrin is the most peculiar man I ever saw," said Raymond, when they were out of hearing. "Here he is, one of the most well-to-do men in town, and yet he is always grumbling about his taxes, and fearing he will come to want."

"He comes naturally enough by his despondent turn of mind," said Mr. Benson. "It has run in the family for several generations. It is hereditary melancholia. There haven't been any of the Perrins that I have ever known who were wholly free from it. I think Dean is the most cheerful one in the lot."

"I pity the others, then," said Raymond.

"His great-grandfather, Jason Perrin, cleared that place," mused Grandfather Benson. "He was a terribly down-spirited man. Everything in life looked gloomy to him. He grew worse as he grew older, and one day they found him dead in the shed-chamber, where he had cut his throat with an old razor. It caused great excitement in Chestnut, I can tell you. His widow lived to be nearly a hundred years old, and was one of the most lively and talkative old ladies in the town. She used to knit a great deal, and one of

my earliest recollections is of going there with yarn that my mother spun to get her to knit me some winter socks and mittens. She was very fond of using big words, frequently with an amusing disregard for their meaning. She and her husband came to Chestnut from the province of New Brunswick. The town was young, and, like many others of the early settlers, they underwent a great many hardships. These Ma'am Perrin loved dearly to relate. 'Ah!' she would say, peering at me over the gold bows of her glasses, 'when we first came to this county we went through all the animosities and pomposities that a poor man and woman could go through. We lost all our cattle, except one old horse—and *he* died.' It's a peculiar fact," continued Mr. Benson, reflectively, "that every one of those Perrin men whom I have known has had a bustling, cheerful little woman for a wife. If it hadn't been for that I think more of them might have followed Jason's example."

"It's the attraction of extremes," said Raymond.

"I suppose so. It shows, however, how wisely everything is ordered in nature, that such an attraction should exist between people of entirely different temperaments."

"Yes, that is true," assented Raymond.

"They used to tell some amusing stories concerning Jason's widow," continued Grandfather Benson, with a merry chuckle at the recollection. "At the time her husband died the Grover farm was owned by Major

Rose, a jolly, whole-souled man, long since passed to the other side, who loved a joke better than he did his dinner. He could never resist practising his drolleries upon Mother Perrin, but for all that the old lady thought a good deal of him, and was a frequent visitor at his home. One time when there had been a long drought she came to him exclaiming:

“ ‘Did you ever see the like o’ this?’ ”

“ ‘My soul,’ said the major, blandly. ‘This is nothing, nothing at all, Mrs. Perrin. When I was a boy we had such a terrible drought that we had to drive our cattle nine miles, and ferry them across three rivers, to get them to water.’ ”

“ ‘Sakes alive! Do tell!’ said the old lady, in genuine surprise, and she hurried off home to tell Jason, whom she found bemoaning the want of rain, and, as usual, predicting dire calamity.

“ ‘Why, this isn’t anything, father,’ she said. ‘When Major Rose was a boy, they had such a terrible drought that they had to drive the cattle nine miles, and ferry them across three rivers, to get them to water.’ ”

“ ‘Land o’ Goshen!’ exclaimed the old gentleman. ‘Why didn’t they water ’em at the first one?’ ”

“ ‘Lord-a-massy! I never thought o’ that,’ said the old lady in great chagrin, and it was a long time before she again put any stock in what Major Rose said. She regained confidence in him in time, however. One day he called at her house for a moment, and got to discussing the matter of miracles with her. From that

the conversation drifted on to faith, which the major sagely asserted was the foundation of all miracles. 'Why,' he said, 'if you should fill your oven with stones and have sufficient faith to believe they would come out biscuits, they would do so.'

" 'Well,' said the good woman, dubiously, 'I've a good oven now, and I don't know as we shall ever have a better chance to try it.' So she hurried out to the rock-pile back of the house, and got her apron full of stones about the size of biscuits, and put them in the oven. She waited, in considerable suspense, for about twenty minutes and then opened the door, but the metamorphosis hadn't occurred.

" 'There!' she exclaimed, a little tartly, 'they're stones and I *knew* they'd be.'

" 'You knew they'd be stones, did you?' queried the major, choking back a laugh. 'Well, that accounts for it. You didn't have the necessary faith,' and he went chuckling up the road."

With these and other anecdotes of early Chestnut people Grandfather Benson managed to draw Raymond's attention from the trial, and when they reached home he was in a much more cheerful frame of mind.

The following afternoon, as Raymond was getting the mail at the Corner post-office, he was attracted by a printed notice on the little bulletin-board in front of the boxes, around which a curious and excited group were gathered. Elbowing his way to the front he read the following announcement:

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD!

FOR THE ARREST AND CONVICTION, OR INFORMATION THAT WILL LEAD TO THE ARREST AND CONVICTION, OF ANY PARTIES BRINGING SMUGGLED GOODS INTO THE TOWN OF CHESTNUT.

JAMES REEVES,

Collector of Customs.

"Well, I declare!" said Raymond. "I never knew before that the government had a fund set aside for that purpose."

"That offer doesn't really come from the government," said Joel Webber, quietly, as he drew him aside.

"Whom does it come from?"

"Citizens of the town. I surmise your Grandfather Benson may have put in something towards it."

"I guess you're mistaken, Joel," declared Raymond. "I haven't heard grandfather say a word about it."

"Very likely you haven't," chuckled Joel. "You'll have to live quite a spell yet before you know all that's inside o' his head."

"But I don't believe he would do anything like this without telling me about it," declared Raymond, in a tone of conviction.

Joel gave him a quizzical smile, and was about to reply, when they were interrupted by Ezra Johnston,

who had pushed his way up to them in an obviously excited frame of mind.

"Thet's what I call a pretty how d' ye do," he exclaimed, wrathfully.

"Potatoes rotting in the cellar, are they?" said Joel, sympathizingly. "Too bad! Too bad!"

"P'taters! who said anything 'bout p'taters?" sniffed Ezra, scornfully. "I was a-meanin' o' thet notice there."

"If I were in your place, Ezra, I'd hitch up the old gray mare, and light out for Canada," said Joel, with a twinkle in his eye. "Only a few people suspect you as yet, and if you get an early start you may possibly get clear of it."

"What in thunder be you a-drivin' at?" wheezed Ezra, wrathfully.

"Sh-h. Not so loud," whispered Joel, warningly. "Don't you see folks are beginning to watch you? I wouldn't lose any more time if I were in your place."

"Git out with ye! What d' ye mean? Are ye a chargin' me with smugglin'?" demanded Ezra, incredulously.

"I was only thinking of your welfare, Ezra," declared Joel, solemnly.

"G'long with ye, I say," shouted Ezra, very red in the face. "It's bad enough for thet blame fool t' gin the town o' Chestnut a black eye, 'thout your accusin' o' me. It's all bosh. There ain't no smugglin' bin done in Chestnut, an' you know it jest es well es I do."

"Perhaps if you go right home and hide those jugs,

Ezra, they won't be able to fasten it on you," said Joel, with deep concern.

"Shet up!" commanded Ezra, angrily. "You're too blame smart. Don't ye dare gin me any more ye sass or I'll—I'll have the law on ye."

With this parting shot Ezra made his way out of the store and hobbled wrathfully up the road.

"That's too bad, Joel," laughed Raymond, when he had gone. "You shouldn't nag the old man that way. It isn't right."

"I stand corrected," said Joel, penitently, "but I simply can't help it. The old fellow takes everything so solemnly that I can't resist the temptation to joke him now and then."

"Whenever you get a chance," added Raymond. "But to return to the main question. What do you really know about that reward?"

"Well, you see Chestnut people were thoroughly interested in the trial of old Pete Atkins, and were mighty anxious to see him convicted. None of them looked for anything else, consequently they were terribly disappointed when the old fellow was acquitted yesterday. They had hoped he would be sent to Thomaston, and that the town would thus become well rid of him. After he was cleared of the arson charge, a number of our leading citizens met in a room at the Crawford House and talked the matter over. They decided that the only way left for transporting him would be to convict him of smuggling. All felt confident that he

had been in the business for years, and that the man, Gambier, was one of his confederates in it. If they could only fix that crime upon him Uncle Sam would take precious good care of him for some time to come. With this purpose in view a purse of one hundred dollars was made up. A committee of the meeting waited upon Mr. Reeves, the Collector of Customs, and easily persuaded him to take charge of the reward. He has been trying to trap Pete for the last three or four years, but the old fellow has always eluded him."

"I think this will bring him, if he keeps on at the business," said Raymond, confidently.

"I think so, too," responded Joel. "I tell you, this reward has created a good deal of excitement in town. It was posted here late yesterday afternoon by one of the deputy collectors, who rode out from Bolton with the printed bills. At five o'clock this morning a strong party was on its way from here to Letter K, to examine Amos Dole's camp at Bower Brook, and the vicinity around it. It is believed that old Pete has carried on his smuggling operations somewhere near there. A few of the party got back a little while ago. The others are going to camp right there and continue the search. They mean to push matters pretty vigorously from this time forth. Cobe Hersom's with them, and no man is any more familiar with Letter K than he is. If there's anything to find he'll find it."

"What did they find at the camp?"

"Nothing out of the way. Old Ike Wallace and a

Frenchman named Ganot were there shaving cedar shingles for Simon Dart. He has a market for them somewhere. It's a business he's carried on for some years past."

"How did Ike and the Frenchman receive the boys?"

"Very handsomely. They invited the whole crowd to take dinner with them in the camp, and really got up quite a spread. Old Ike is a pretty good cook when he lays himself out."

"Did the boys notice anything suspicious about the camp?"

"Not a thing. Amos Dole was with them, and he said it looked just as it did when he lumbered there, except that there wasn't anything in it. He built the camp and says there certainly wasn't anything wrong about it to-day. Ike Wallace was terribly bitter against old Pete, and was sorely disappointed to hear he was acquitted. He said he had not seen anything of the old villain while he had been working at the camp, but that he would keep his eyes open and let the boys know if he noticed anything suspicious."

"Do you suppose he will?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. He hates old Pete Atkins just as badly as any of us, and will do all he can to help run him to earth."

"Well, I hope he may succeed in doing it," said Raymond, as he left the store. "It looks more like it than it ever has before," he added.

Instead of going home at once, Raymond drove to his

Uncle Weston's, about a mile distant, to do several errands for Grandfather Benson. It was nearly dusk when he returned to the Corner. He drove rapidly down the cross-road back of Cobe Hersom's shop, which stood on one of the four corners, and presently hitched his horse at one of the posts in front of Simon Dart's store. It was a plain, unpretentious, story-and-a-half building. Originally it had been painted a light yellow with white trimmings. The ravages of time, however, had robbed it of most of its primitive color, which clung to it now only in isolated patches, giving it a peculiarly unkempt and dingy appearance.

The basement of the building, which was used for storage purposes, extended into the side of a steep embankment. It was from this, the older inhabitants said, that a great deal of earth had been taken when the cross-road was continued beyond the Corner, and Simon's father, with an eye to economy, had purchased it, thereby avoiding the expense of digging a cellar. The plan worked very well, except as regarded the store front, where the sills stood over six feet above the level of the road. Here a deep platform was built, reached from the road by a flight of broad steps. Raymond noticed that the space under this platform was used by Simon for storing empty boxes. It was very nearly filled with a miscellaneous collection of them. One end of the platform was boarded up, while the other had been left open to serve as a door. Near this Raymond observed a large, empty dry-goods box, resting upon its

side with its open part next the store. "That's almost big enough for a camp," he soliloquized. Going upon the platform he saw that its flooring was laid in joist, with open spaces between nearly an inch in width. Having noted these points he entered the store.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Benson. Beautiful day we've had," said Simon, with an affable smirk, as he stood nervously rubbing his hands behind the counter. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I'll have a pound of that best black tea."

"Will that be all?"

"Yes, all to-night."

In a short time the tea was done up and Raymond had turned to leave the store when the door opened to admit the bulky form of Cobe Hersom.

"Why, I thought you were down on Letter K," said Raymond, as they shook hands.

"So I was," said Cobe, in a tone of disgust, "but 't was a wild-goose chase; stood a blamed sight better show o' gittin' Ezra Johnston's catamount. The boys are all back. They've blown off all their steam an' I reckon most on 'em are feelin' a trifle silly. I'm the only one who had nerve enough t' attend the naggin' bee at Copeland's store. I'm case-hardened you know," he added, with a laugh.

"So you don't think there are any smugglers down there?" questioned Raymond, carelessly.

"Smugglers? Not a one on 'em. It's all moonshine."

"Just my idea exactly, Mr. Benson," eagerly interposed Simon, in his thin, nasal tones. "I don't believe there was ever any smuggling done on Letter K. There's too much hunting and fishing done there, to say nothing of the lumbering operations."

"I reckon you're right, Mr. Dart," assented Cobe. "People are apt t' git notions into their heads an' it's mighty hard t' git 'em out. There's a lot o' folks who think Atkins fetches his rum across the Letter K line."

"That's a likely idea!" sniffed Simon, contemptuously. "Just as if it wouldn't be a good deal easier to drive across the line on one of the regular roads 'most any dark night. A good many people do that on their own account, as we all know, and how many of them were ever caught?"

"Don't recollect o' any right round here," admitted Cobe. "Thet sort o' thing would do once in a while mebbe, if a man went light; but it would git mighty risky in a short spell if a man made a business on it. Folks would begin t' git cur'us."

"A man could carry rum enough in a beach-wagon to go a long ways," suggested Simon.

"Thet's right," assented Cobe.

"I've lived all my life in this town," declared Simon. "I guess I know as much about it as 'most any one, and it's my honest opinion that there's no town in the county where less smuggling is done than right here in Chestnut."

Cobe nodded his head in acquiescence, while Ray-

mond left the store, unhitched his horse, and climbing into the farm wagon drove leisurely home in some depression of spirits.

“The oily-tongued rascal!” he muttered, as he recalled Simon’s conversation with Cobe. “He’s trying to throw folks off the scent, and succeeding remarkably well—though perhaps not as well as he thinks he is. I believe I’ve found the key to old Pete Atkins’s operations, and it will not be my fault if I don’t unlock their mysteries.”

CHAPTER XXI

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR

The day following Raymond's trip to the Corner Grandfather Benson drove to Bolton to look after some business matters, leaving affairs at the farm in charge of Raymond and Dud.

It was after dark when supper was over, and with milk-pail in hand Raymond started to follow Dud to the barn. As he came into the yard he noticed the outline of a team standing before the closed door of the stable.

"Hello," he thought, "grandfather's got back."

He was about to offer his assistance in putting up the horse when another team drove into the yard, and Grandfather Benson's voice called out:

"Whose team is this?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I thought it was yours," responded Raymond, in surprise.

"Where's Dudley?"

"He's milking."

"Well, I wish you'd go into the house and get the other lantern. We'll investigate this matter a little."

A few moments later Raymond returned from the kitchen with a lantern on his arm, and he and Grand-

father Benson walked along to the strange team. It was a side-bar buggy, drawn by a small, black horse.

"I know that team," said Mr. Benson, quietly. "It belongs to Charles Adams, the Bolton liveryman. He bought that little horse of Dean Perrin."

The top of the buggy to which the intelligent little animal was hitched was turned back, notwithstanding the sharp fall weather. Stretched out upon the seat, with his head resting upon one corner of it, was a large, fine-looking man. He wore a valuable fur overcoat; his head was bare, but a tall silk hat which lay in the bottom of the buggy showed what had covered it.

"Is he asleep?" asked Raymond, as he flashed the lantern into his face.

"I should rather say he was in a drunken stupor," responded Mr. Benson, in tones of deep disgust. "It's a sad sight to see a fine-looking man like him in such a beastly condition," he added, soberly.

"What shall we do with him?"

"We shall have to take him into the house. It would certainly never do to leave him here in this kind of weather."

Together they carried the limp and helpless man into the spare bedroom, where, after pulling off his boots, they laid him on the bed, spread a few quilts and blankets over him, and left him to sleep off the overpowering effects of his potations.

"He won't wake up before morning," said Grandfather Benson, as they returned to the stable to take care

of the horses. "He furnishes the most forcible kind of a temperance lecture," he added.

"I hope you don't believe me in need of the lesson it teaches?" said Raymond, a little anxiously.

"No indeed, my boy," was the hearty rejoinder. "I know that you have your faults, but I have never had the slightest fear that you would be other than a temperate man. The desire for liquor does not run in the Benson family. For that reason, perhaps, we are not deserving of so much credit for our total abstinence principles as the poor fellows who keep their lives temperate only by constantly fighting into subjection an inherent appetite for strong drink."

"The fellow in the house probably came here from the den of Pete Atkins," said Raymond. "It's a fair sample of the work he is doing."

"I think very likely," returned Mr. Benson, "that is, if he got his liquor here in Chestnut."

By this time the horses were put up, and Raymond hurried to the barn to help Dud with the milking, but the big fellow had nearly finished the work. A little later he and Raymond returned to the house with brimming milk-pails, and shortly after, when the evening prayers were over, retired for the night.

The following morning, while Grandfather Benson and the boys sat around the kitchen table, busily engaged in disposing of the hot buckwheat flapjacks which Mrs. Benson was frying on the large griddle over the stove, the stranger made his appearance. He had slept off his

drunken stupor, and a careful toilet had made a vast change in his appearance. He looked decidedly shame-faced as he surveyed the group about the table, and realized that he had been the recipient of private hospitality—not to say charity. He paused in the doorway of the sitting-room as if undetermined how to act, but Grandfather Benson quickly relieved him of his embarrassment.

“Good-morning,” he said, pleasantly, as he motioned the traveler to a chair beside him. “How did you rest?”

“Very nicely, thank you,” was the response.

The ice thus cordially broken the stranger appeared to recover somewhat from his reserve, and chatted freely with the group about the table.

“What direction is Bolton from here?” he finally inquired.

“Where should you say?” was Grandfather Benson’s Yankee answer.

“In that direction,” pointing towards the Corner.

“You are exactly turned around.”

“And Bolton is in the opposite direction?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I never should have thought it. The fact is, I wasn’t just myself last night—a little mixed, I guess—my own fault—must have made a fool of myself, I know—talked like an idiot, didn’t I?”

“No, you were not in a condition to say anything.”

A look of intense relief came over the stranger’s face.

"I can appreciate your kindness to me, sir, and I think I can assure you that the lesson this disgraceful experience has taught me will not be without good results."

"I certainly hope so," returned Grandfather Benson, and no further reference was made to the stranger's state on the previous night.

"Is that gentleman your father?" asked the mysterious visitor of Raymond, as Grandfather Benson turned away to assist Dud in harnessing his horse.

"No, my grandfather."

"And his name is Benson, isn't it?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I inferred as much from that," said the stranger, pointing to the charred ruins of the barn. "I read all about the trial in the newspapers, and, if I am not mistaken, you are the young man who figured so prominently in it."

"Yes," said Raymond, with a flushed face, "I am the one. I suppose you gathered from what you read that I was the real villain in the case. The lawyer for the defense tried hard enough to make it appear that way."

"On the contrary," said the stranger, with an amused expression on his face, "I concluded that you were a pretty decent kind of a fellow. That was your first experience in a court trial I take it."

"Yes, and I hope it will be the last."

"Well, I hope so, too; but a small part of the experience I have had in such trials would teach you not to mind what opposing counsel said of you. If he should

berate you with special vigor you would esteem it a high compliment."

"Are you a lawyer?"

"Not exactly," was the evasive response. "I'm a sort of lawyer's devil. I drum up business for the profession. You never had any doubts but that Atkins burned that barn, did you?"

"Not the slightest."

"Well, neither did I. The verdict was a surprise to me, and I guess it was to everybody who followed the case. There is no doubt but that Atkins is engaged in smuggling liquor across the line, is there?"

"Well, that seems to be the general opinion."

"They've offered a reward of a hundred dollars that is really aimed at him, haven't they?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you win it?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I believe you can do it. I am indebted to you and your people for the hospitable manner in which you have used me. I assure you I am not insensible of your kindness. As a proof of this I am going to give you a tip that will be worth something to you. It is this: Watch Dart's store. If you do this at the proper time you may learn something that will be worth at least a hundred dollars to you. I feel confident that you are shrewd enough to grasp my meaning."

"I think I am," said Raymond, doubtfully, "but if

that tip is worth so much why don't you get the money yourself?"

"Circumstances which I cannot explain to you render it impossible, but believe me, my boy, I have spoken to you in good faith. I should certainly be lacking in all sense of gratitude were I to do otherwise. You may act as you see fit, but time will surely show you the importance of what I have said to you."

By this time the stranger's horse was harnessed, and as he was about to resume his drive towards Bolton, he urged Mr. Benson to accept pay for his lodging and breakfast.

"I couldn't think of it," was the firm response. "I have never, as a private citizen, put a price upon the hospitalities of my house, and it's too late for me to begin now. You know it's hard for an old dog to learn new tricks," he added with a smile.

"But I was an utter stranger to you, with absolutely no claim upon you for entertainment," protested the visitor, warmly. "I don't think it possible to repay your kindness to me with money, but I assure you that I should really feel better, though none the less indebted to you, if you would permit me to reimburse you for at least the actual trouble and expense I have been to you."

"I can't break my rule," said Mr. Benson with decision, "but if this experience is a benefit to your future I shall feel fully repaid."

"It certainly shall be," said the stranger as he

climbed into the buggy and, with a pleasant "good-bye," drove away in the direction of Bolton.

"Who do you suppose he was?" asked Raymond, when their involuntary guest was out of hearing.

"I haven't the slightest idea. I do not remember of ever having seen him before. He was evidently, though, an educated, intelligent man, and a close observer both of men and affairs. I certainly hope he may never again be in such condition as we found him in last night."

The remarks of the mysterious visitor had made a deep impression upon Raymond, and through all the work of the day he was busily engaged in turning them over in his mind. He was convinced that the stranger knew more about Pete Atkins and his gang than he was willing to tell. On the other hand, if he had spoken sincerely, he had said enough to show that he entertained no friendly feelings toward them. The value of his "tip" was yet to be determined, but Raymond fully made up his mind that it would not be his fault if it was not ascertained in the near future.

"What do you know about Simon Dart, grandfather?" he asked, as Mr. Benson sat reading his favorite weekly paper before the open fire in the sitting-room.

"Simon Dart? Why do you ask that question, my boy? Have—has any one been talking about him?"

"Well, I've heard some rumors about him," admitted Raymond.

"I trust you'll not repeat any stories you hear," continued Mr. Benson. "Hearsay is not always to be trusted, and there are many people in town who do not like Simon very well."

"I know that," responded Raymond, "but I was a little curious to know about him. Was he born here?"

"Yes. His mother was a sister to Dean Perrin."

"Dean Perrin?" ejaculated Raymond, in surprise. "I never knew before that he was any relation of Dart's."

"Yes, he's an own uncle. They have scarcely been on speaking terms, though, for a number of years. There was trouble, I believe, a number of years back. Simon's mother was an excellent woman. Her people were bitterly opposed to Dart, who was, I believe, a Russian Jew. At any rate he first put in an appearance in Chestnut as a peddler."

Mr. Benson paused and pushed his spectacles over his forehead.

"I guess he led her a dreary life of it," he continued reflectively. "At any rate she didn't seem to take it very much to heart when he was finally arrested for smuggling and sent to prison for a long term of years. He died there. His widow kept the store going, and brought up Simon, who was their only child. He was an odd boy who never seemed to have the faculty of making friends among his playmates. He appeared to unite the Perrin melancholy with the penurious grasping of his father—a rather unhappy combination. I

remember that they used to charge him with starving and abusing his mother after he came into possession of the store, but very likely that was overdrawn. I imagine that she must have been something of a trial to him. She finally went crazy, you know, and was taken to the Insane Hospital at Augusta, where she afterwards died."

"I never heard of this before," said Raymond, with deep interest.

"No. I presume not. That was before your day and generation. Simon has been in trade at the Corner for over thirty years. He took the store from his mother, who carried it on, as I have said, for a number of years, after his father was sent to prison. It is nearly twenty years since she died, and she was at the hospital four or five years."

"I'm glad to know what you've told me, grandfather," said Raymond, gratefully. "I know, of course, what folks think of Sime Dart. That's town talk. This is the first time, however, that I ever heard of his being related to the Perrin family."

"It's a connection that his mother's people have never been very proud of, I imagine," said Mr. Benson. "At least, so far as I know, they never have had very much to say about it."

"What sort of a business reputation has Simon Dart?" asked Raymond.

"Well, he's always seemed to sell a shade cheaper than the other traders," replied Mr. Benson; "but

then, that's not surprising. His expenses are almost nothing."

"Has he ever been suspected of shady transactions?" asked Raymond.

Mr. Benson gave him a questioning look.

"Some one's been talking to you, I guess," he remarked. "I dare say some such talk has been made, but as I've said before it doesn't pay to believe all you hear."

"But where there's a good deal of smoke there's pretty sure to be a little fire," suggested Raymond.

"Possibly," was Mr. Benson's non-committal reply. "Still, sometimes a very little fire makes a great deal of smoke."

Raymond forbore to pursue the subject further, but he went to bed that night fully convinced that he was on the track of revelations that would, sooner or later, startle the good people of Chestnut.

CHAPTER XXII

SOME SHARP PRACTICES OF SIMON DART

"You and I will have that reward, Ned!"

It was Raymond Benson who spoke, and his words had a very electrifying effect upon Ned Grover, whom he had taken to his den for a confidential chat.

"You are not in earnest, are you?" he asked eagerly.

"I was never more so in my life, Ned. I feel morally certain that if you and I go about this thing in the right way we shall get that hundred dollars."

"You don't really mean that we shall be able to secure the arrest and conviction of old Pete Atkins, do you?"

"That is just exactly what I mean."

"I don't see how."

"Well, I'll tell you how. I have been putting this and that together, and I think I am beginning to get at the inside of this thing. It is very evident that if old Pete is carrying on much of a smuggling business, or bringing anything across the line except the liquor he sells at his house, he must have a market for his wares. In other words, there must be some confederate on the Yankee side to take his goods and dispose of them. I am convinced that old Pete has such an ally, and I believe that I have discovered him."

"Who is he?"

"Sime Dart."

"Sime Dart!" exclaimed Ned, in astonishment. "You must surely be mistaken, old fellow. He carries on his business altogether too openly to be engaged in that kind of work. I don't have a very high opinion of the fellow. In fact, I know he's a knave; but I think we must concede that he is no fool."

"He certainly is no fool, but depend upon it, Ned, he's a sneak—a thoroughbred scoundrel. He always gives me a crawly feeling. There is something clammy about him."

"He's an uncanny bird," said Ned. "But I do not see what good reason you have for suspecting him of being the receiver of old Pete's smuggled goods."

"There are a number of reasons, old fellow. In the first place a good many more things go out of his store than ever come from Bolton. It seems strange to me now that the people of this town haven't noticed it."

"If he keeps smuggled goods in stock, wouldn't it be an easy thing for the Custom House officers to search his store and establish the fact?"

"Perhaps so, but you see they have never suspected him. The fellow is shrewd and has played his part well. He must have, to throw the dust so completely in the eyes of the people of this town."

"Why don't you tell the officers of your suspicions?"

"And lose that reward? Not much, my boy. Besides, I'd a good deal rather see old Pete 'Atkins in

limbo than to have that hundred dollars. If the officers should descend on Dart, Pete would take to the woods and hide there till the storm blew over. In the meantime he would contrive to keep his wife and boys supplied with liquor, and they would continue the business just the same. The first fish we want is old Pete. When we once get him in the meshes, it will not be so much trouble to secure Dart."

"You're right there," assented Ned, "but you've only given me one reason for believing that Dart is a confederate of old Pete, and that is by no means a conclusive one. I think your experience in court has shown you that it wouldn't have much weight there."

"Well, Dart has always said a good word for old Pete at every opportunity, and is always endeavoring to excuse his knavery by saying that he is a generous and obliging neighbor. During the recent trial he was the old fellow's right-hand man. He secured his lawyers and found all the witnesses for him. In my opinion he trumped up that alibi that finally cleared the old fellow. He had a long talk with Gambier before the trial, which I think had a great deal to do with the man's obstinate refusal to tell who was with him the night of the fire."

"I didn't know that."

"Few people did, but it's a fact all the same. I'll tell you another thing. I believe that Amos Dole's old camp is the headquarters for Pete and his gang, and Ike Wallace and the Frenchman with him are members of it. Their shaving shingles is only a blind, as is also

their cordial treatment of visitors to the camp. It is doubtless true that they are working for Dart, but not at shingle-making. Ike and old Pete Atkins are partners in quite a different business; and you and I will prove it before many days."

"But the party from the Corner took dinner at the camp and didn't see anything about it the least suspicious."

"There may have been no smuggled goods on hand at that time. If there were, you may depend upon it they were not far from that camp."

"What is your plan, Raymond? I'm with you through thick and thin in anything you may do to trap old Pete. No one can be more anxious than I am to rid the town of him."

"My idea is this, Ned. Those fellows must land their stuff at Dart's store in the early morning hours. It would be hard to imagine a place better adapted for such work. It is back of the Corner, and shut off from it by the little hill. There is not another building anywhere around it, except the church. Now my idea is for you and me to be at Dart's store and see a load of those goods delivered. That would give us testimony enough at the start to convict both Simon and Pete."

"That's an ingenious scheme, certainly," said Ned, "but I don't believe Simon will be accommodating enough to furnish us quarters for that purpose."

"You don't understand me. I said at the store, but

not in it. My idea is for you and me to camp in a big dry-goods box there is under the store platform and await developments."

"But we'd freeze to death," objected Ned, shivering at the thought. "These October nights are mighty chilly."

"We should want to go protected from the cold. Each of us will want an extra pair of warm woolen stockings, and a buffalo overcoat outside of our regular one. In addition to that we ought to have a couple of thick robes. With such an outfit we need have no fear of the cold."

"Yes, we should be all right on that score," admitted Ned; "but how can we be sure what night they will bring goods there? We might watch there a whole week and not discover anything."

"I have thought of that," said Raymond, "but I don't see any way to avoid it. We must take our chances, and watch until they do come. I have an idea, however, that they select the darkest nights for those trips. It would be well, anyway, for us to make a beginning on such a one."

A few days later the boys drove to the Corner about midnight and put their team in one of the sheds back of the church, carefully blanketing the horse for protection against the cold. The night was pitchy black, but a dark lantern assisted them in finding their way. They had concluded, after some discussion, to take one along with them, deciding that, as Simon

would probably be in bed, they would run less risk of discovery from its light than they otherwise would from the noise they might make stumbling over the boxes. The event showed this conclusion to be correct. With the assistance of the lantern the boys were enabled to reach the box without disturbing in the least the silence of the night. They found it somewhat more cramped than they had anticipated, but it was nicely sheltered from the wind, and warmer than they had dared to hope. They soon had their robes spread and were comfortably settled for the night.

At first they thought of taking turns watching, but finally decided that both should remain awake. "It will be so much more cheerful," said Raymond, "if we keep each other company. Besides, we can sleep all day in my den if we want to. I will tell grandmother not to wake us. I tell you, old fellow," he added, enthusiastically, "we are on the right track, and if we only hang to it long enough we will certainly win. I think we had better plan to be together as much as possible while we are working on this matter."

"Yes, that's a good idea," assented Ned, "but, my soul! isn't this just a trifle lonesome, though? Doesn't that wind sound dismal up there in the graveyard? I remember that old Aunt Ruth, who used to live on the other side of the graveyard, always said that the spirits of the dead were talking when the wind blew like that."

"Aunt Ruth who?" asked Raymond. "I never knew that there was a house below the cemetery."

"Yes, that old story-and-a-half stable of Simon's behind the store here was one."

"I always thought that it never could have been intended for a stable."

"Well, it wasn't. Uncle Jerry Hope, who cleared up the fields below the graveyard, built it when he was a young man. That was nearly eighty years ago. His wife, Aunt Ruth Hope, survived him ten years, and it's nearly that since she died. Poor old lady! I used to pity her. When Uncle Jerry died she supposed that all he owed was a few hundred dollars to Simon Dart. That would have left his widow enough to have kept her in comfort the rest of her days. When Simon produced his notes, however, they amounted to three thousand—one for twelve hundred and the other for eighteen hundred dollars. Of course it was a terrible blow to Aunt Ruth. Uncle Jerry was a man who had never let her know much about his business affairs, but she never had an idea but that he had property enough to pay every dollar that he owed and have a snug little balance."

"Do you suppose those notes were forgeries?" asked Raymond, who had been intensely interested in this narrative.

"No. Aunt Ruth knew that Uncle Jerry had borrowed something from Simon, though she had never dreamed it was so much, and was unable for the life of her to think where the money had gone to. Besides, no man could possibly have imitated Uncle Jerry's

signature. I don't believe there was another one in the world anything like it.

"How long had these notes been running?"

"Oh, ten or fifteen years."

"Didn't Mr. Hope pay anything at all on them during that time?"

"Nothing except the interest, which was duly endorsed on the notes. Aunt Ruth said her husband wanted to take them up once or twice, for she remembered to have heard him speak of it, but Simon said he was in no hurry whatever for the money, and urged him to put what he had into improvements on the farm. Uncle Jerry followed his advice and bought the large mowing field opposite the church, and also a good slice of the Bell woods. He had great faith in Simon, who was a deacon in the church and one of its pillars."

"Yes, that's Simon," said Raymond. "I believe that he has served the devil in the livery of heaven for a good many years. Do you know, from just what little you have told me, I am convinced that the figures on those notes were raised. Simon probably wrote them himself and imposed upon the confiding old man by putting the amounts in figures instead of writing them out in words. Who witnessed them?"

"Simon's mother."

"That's it exactly. As a witness she became dead, to all practical intents and purposes, when she was taken to the insane asylum, and Simon had Uncle Jerry in his power."

"What do you think he did?" asked Ned, with evident interest.

"I think he added a cipher to the figures of both those notes, thus increasing the amount of each a thousand dollars. I have no doubt but that, when Uncle Jerry signed them, one was for a hundred and twenty and the other for a hundred and eighty dollars."

"My gracious! I believe you're right!" exclaimed Ned, excitedly.

"I haven't a doubt of it," said Raymond. "What surprises me is to think that none of the townspeople ever thought of it."

"They probably would if they entertained the same opinion of Simon Dart that you do, but they didn't. They looked upon him at that time as a paragon of virtue and piety. They are better acquainted with him now."

"Isn't it strange that people will be so blind?"

"After Simon took the farm everybody was praising him for his generous treatment of Aunt Ruth. He allowed her the rent of the house free as long as she lived, and gave her a great many things from the store."

"He probably had a sneaking notion that he ought to allow her at least the interest on what belonged to her," said Raymond, indignantly.

"Very likely. The neighbors always kept her supplied with wood and were continually carrying things to her, so that, with the knitting she did, she managed to get along very comfortably. But she was a queer

old soul. As she grew older she partially lost her mind, and had all sorts of strange notions. When the wind blew she used to say it was the spirits of the dead in the graveyard, warning sinners to repentance, and was positive she could distinguish the voice of Uncle Jerry above all the others. There was something weird to me about her, and I always had an uneasy feeling that she only half belonged to this world anyway."

"Poor soul! Very likely she didn't," said Raymond, sympathizingly.

"Simon's treatment of Uncle Jerry didn't look just right, but nobody was able to put a finger upon anything that was wrong. You see he is a shrewd fellow and has always covered his tracks. A few years ago Charles Prowl, an old soldier, gave him some pension money to keep for him. When he came after it Simon insisted that he had paid it back to him two months before. Prowl knew better than that, and brought suit against Simon to recover the amount which Dart very frankly admitted had been given into his keeping. Considerable sympathy was awakened in town for Prowl, and the opinion was very generally expressed that Dart had swindled him. When the case came to trial, though, Simon exhibited to the court a receipt for the full amount signed by Prowl himself. Everybody was dumfounded. Prowl stoutly maintained that he had never signed any such receipt, but his signature was shown to be genuine. The body of the receipt Simon admitted was in his own handwriting. He had made

it out and got Prowl to sign it, he said, simply as a matter of business and to protect himself from any future demand that might be made upon him."

"Well, that was proper, if he paid the money," asserted Raymond.

"That's the point," said Ned. "Lots of people in this town don't believe he ever did pay it."

"How did he come by that receipt, then?"

"Easily enough, by looking ahead a little. When he took Prowl's money he meant to cheat him out of it. Charles was an ignorant fellow, and when Simon told him that it would be necessary for him to sign a paper certifying that he had made Dart the keeper of his money the poor fellow believed it was all right. Simon wrote out such a statement on a long sheet of paper and Prowl signed it near the bottom of the page. When he had gone Simon cut the agreement off the top, wrote a receipt for the money over the signature, and put it away in his safe to protect him in his knavery when Prowl should demand the money."

"But of course Prowl stated these facts to the court!" exclaimed Raymond.

"Yes, but he had no proof of them," returned Ned.

"I see; nothing but his word," admitted Raymond.

"It was shown that he had been seen with Dart on the day his money was alleged to have been paid back to him," continued Ned, "and that he had been drinking quite heavily. The presumption was that he had gone on a spree with his money and lost it or blown it in."

"Yes, I see. The fact that he was a drinking man went against him."

"It certainly did, though I don't see what case he would have had against Dart under any circumstances."

"I should have thought the church would have been anxious to get rid of Simon."

"Well, it was, but he was shrewd enough to save them any trouble in the matter by withdrawing."

"Do you know, Ned, what you have told me only makes me the more anxious to get that scoundrel up-stairs in limbo?" said Raymond, earnestly.

"I'm with you there," responded Ned; and then the boys lay for a long time in silence, each busy with his own thoughts. The night wore away slowly. It seemed to them that they had never before realized what an immense amount of time there is in sixty minutes. They felt cramped and stiff when they finally left their box at about four o'clock in the morning, having reluctantly arrived at the conclusion that no smuggled goods would be delivered at Simon's store after that hour.

"I am just as anxious as any one to rid the town of old Pete Atkins," said Ned, disgustedly, as they drove home, "but I don't hanker after very much sport of this sort."

"Oh, well," responded Raymond, encouragingly, "we can't expect to accomplish everything in a minute. If we succeed in breaking up old Pete's gang we've got to show some perseverance and overcome some

obstacles. Just think," he added, enthusiastically, "what a feather it would be in our caps to rid the town of that old scoundrel, and get the hundred dollars reward. All we've got to do is to show a little pluck and persistency, and we are sure to win the prize."

CHAPTER XXIII

RAYMOND AND NED DO DETECTIVE WORK

A forenoon's sleep in Raymond's den restored Ned's drooping spirits, and the next evening he was ready and anxious to resume the watch upon Dart's store. But they were once more doomed to disappointment. The night wore slowly away without a sign of old Pete or any one else.

When the boys drove home in the morning their courage was at a low ebb, and Ned was earnestly in favor of abandoning this part of the program. Raymond was unwilling to do this, however, and, after considerable argument, persuaded his companion to watch with him one more night, agreeing not to ask him to go again in case their vigils should continue to prove fruitless. He mentally determined, however, to keep the watch alone. But this time their patience was rewarded. About two o'clock in the morning a heavy wagon drove up before Dart's store, and the driver, alighting, pounded upon the window of Simon's room over the store with a long bamboo fish-pole, which he drew from under the benches on the platform. A moment later the window was slowly and carefully raised, and a voice, which the boys readily recognized

as Simon's, inquired in a cautious whisper, "Is that you, Pete?"

"Sure," responded the familiar tones of the Chestnut rumseller. "Come down and help me unload."

The window closed, and in a few moments the boys, who were breathless with suppressed excitement, heard the front door open and Simon step out upon the platform.

"You are early," he said. "I didn't expect you before three. Didn't see any one, did you?" he added, anxiously.

"Not a soul. I got an early start from the camp an' thought as how I'd better poke right through."

"Is this all there is?" inquired Simon.

"No, only 'bout half. There's another load in the scoop."

"Hear that? The scoop," whispered Raymond, giving Ned a dig in the ribs. "I felt sure they had a hiding-place somewhere. It's a dugout, and not very far from the camp."

"Sh-h," said Ned, warningly.

"How much you got on?" asked Simon.

"Not a heavy load," answered Pete, "an' it's all in this big box. It's going t' be quite a lift for us to git it down cellar, but I guess we can do it. Lend a hand."

"I should think they had a piano by the way they grunt," whispered Ned, as the two men bore their burden into the store.

Raymond made no reply to this. As soon as the door

closed behind Pete and his companion, he threw open the slide of his dark lantern and stole silently from the box, whispering to Ned to remain where he was. In a moment more he returned to the box, bringing a whip in his hand.

"This will prove an important witness for me later on, old boy," he said, as he handed it to Ned.

"I should say as much," was the admiring response. "Raymond, you are the longest-headed fellow I ever knew."

The whip was a whalebone. Just above the handle was a band of German silver upon which was engraved the name "P. Atkins."

"That's good as far as it goes," whispered Ned, as he examined this name with the aid of the dark lantern. "Still—"

"Still what?" interrupted Raymond, impatiently.

"Pete would swear that we found it somewhere else."

"Of course he would," assented Raymond, "but you and I know just where we found it, don't we?"

"Yes."

"Well, it would be mighty funny if your word and mine didn't weigh as much with a jury as that of Pete Atkins."

"Sh-h," continued Ned, in a warning whisper.

Simon and Pete had come out upon the platform again in very earnest conversation.

"It's no use, Sime, I'm afraid you an' I will have t' dissolve partnership. This vicinity is gittin' too hot

for me. Everybody is after me now, since the Custom House officers put up thet reward. I think I've shown ye, on more'n one occasion, thet I'm no coward, but I tell ye I don't keer t' spend ten or fifteen years down t' Thomaston, not if I know myself. I'd a good deal ruther play the respectable citizen, jine the church, an' settle down t' farmin', though the profits would seem mighty small in comparison. But I've laid up suthin' in these years o' prosperity, an' the income on it would help out consider'ble. I shouldn't have t' do my farmin' alone by any means."

"Bah!" said Simon, impatiently. "I never thought to see you so weak-kneed. That trial seems to have taken all the starch out of you. Brace up, man! Show a little nerve."

"I tell ye, Sime," protested Pete, "thet was a closer shave than I like. If it hadn't been for the alibi you trumped up, I should hev been doin' time in Thomaston now, with no immediate prospect o' leavin' there. I thought sure I was a gone coon when thet boy was testifyin'. Confound him! I've got an account t' settle with 'im! He's been the cause o' all this trouble. Everything would ha' be'n all right if he hadn't crossed my path."

"You brought the whole thing on yourself by your own idiotic folly," said Dart, bitterly. "How many times have I advised you never to sacrifice business interests to personal feelings. What did the life of that dog amount to? What would the lives of a hundred

dogs amount to compared to the success of our ventures? I would give five hundred of the best dogs this town ever saw if we could be back on as good footing as we were when you burned Benson's barn."

"Well, I don't intend t' be run over by any one," declared Pete, sullenly.

"Run over! Bah! You haven't the balance or self-control of a sensible louse. This isn't the first time that you've come near upsetting everything by your rattle-brained malice. There was that Boston detective you bought up last week. You were lucky enough to get a twist on him and choke him off, but you showed very poor judgment in filling him up with whiskey. The fellow got beastly drunk and brought up in an insensible condition in Andrew Benson's dooryard. They kept him over night there. I heard Dud Rich telling somebody about it here in the store yesterday. I never had anything startle me so. I thought you had better judgment than to act like that. It's a wonder the fellow didn't get to talking and give the whole thing away. He would, I guess, if his tongue hadn't been too thick to wag. I tell you, Pete, such carelessness as that will certainly ruin us. You must be more cautious, and above all control your temper. I can hate as strongly as any man, but I don't sacrifice my business interests to my likes or dislikes. I'm not quite so big a fool as that, thank heaven."

"No, you're a deep one, you are," was Pete's sarcastic rejoinder. "You haven't the feelin' of a man

in your whole carcass. You've bottled yourself up your whole life, until now it wouldn't seem nat'ral for ye t' let yourself clean out on anything. All ye can do is scheme, an' I honestly believe you'd let anybody rub your nose in the dirt if it would help ye carry a p'int. I'm not your style. When a man treads on my toes he's going t' git kicked for it. I don't claim my doin's hev allus be'n open an' aboveboard, but one thing is sartin sure, I never was mean enough t' cheat a poor old woman out o' her home."

"No, but you came mighty near burning old man Graves out of his."

"Well, I had cause for it. If he'd left me alone I should never hev troubled 'im. I reckon I showed 'im in a forcible sort o' way thet 't was a pretty good plan t' mind his own bis'ness."

"Oh, yes, no doubt," said Dart, coldly. "Now I should like to know what you meant by my cheating an old woman out of her home."

"Oh, ye do, hey? I don't s'pose ye can possibly imagine," was Pete's contemptuous rejoinder. "See here, Sime, it's all right t' play the virtuous citizen with other folks, but it won't go down with me. I'm no spring chicken, an' don't ye forgit it. Ye must think me pesky green not t' know how you got hold o' the Hope place."

"I came into possession of it legally, and have papers to prove it."

"Papers!" sneered Pete. "O' course ye got papers.

You've got papers t' prove 'most anything ye take a notion to; but thet sort o' bluff don't go down with me, understand thet."

"How many people have you made this talk to?" asked Simon, suspiciously.

"What d' ye take me for?" demanded Pete, indignantly.

"I used to think you were a man I could rely on, but the way you've been acting of late has led me to think that I may have been mistaken," returned Simon, sharply. "Just bear one thing in mind, Pete Atkins, you are in my power. A few words from me would put you where the dogs couldn't bark at you for a long term of years. Don't forget that fact."

"But ye wouldn't dare t' speak thet word, for ye know mighty well thet ye would go along t' bear me company if ye did. I don't believe ye are any more anxious t' live in a cage than I am."

"My dear man," said Simon, blandly, "you are laboring under a sad delusion. There is not a particle of evidence by which you could show to a court that I have ever had any connection whatever with your affairs. I have looked out for that, I assure you."

"Look a-here, Sime," retorted Pete, fiercely, "you've had a chance t' become pretty well acquainted with me in the past few years, an' I swear to ye thet if ye ever go back on me I'll hev your life for it."

"Come, come, don't get so excited," said Simon, in a conciliatory tone, evidently not liking the intense and

vigorous earnestness of Pete's threat. "You know very well that I would never betray you. Haven't I always stood by you through thick and thin? What reason have you to ever look for treachery on my part?"

"I didn't like your talk 'bout my bein' in your power," said Pete, in a mollified tone. "It didn't sound right."

"You know very well that I didn't mean anything by it. You and I are just made to work together. I can make the plans and you can carry 'em out. Neither of us can get along without the other. We must hang together. It's bad business, though, when you make foolish breaks that jeopardize all my plans. You have energy and pluck enough to make this thing a success as long as we wish to continue it, if you'll only exercise a little ordinary horse-sense. That business of Benson's, though, was the most foolish thing you ever did. It thoroughly disgusted me. You acted like a fool."

"See here, Sime," sneered Pete, "ye might jest es well quit your preachin'. It don't work with me. It was a habit ye picked up while ye was a-runnin' o' the church, but ye oughter hev left it off when ye got into better bis'ness."

"I think a fellow whose brainless folly has sacrificed a valuable man like Jean Gambier deserves to be preached to," returned Dart, bitterly. "I tell you I had a hard time to persuade that man not to turn State's evidence. If he had, the jig would have been up for both of us."

"That was a piece o' sharp work, Sime," said Pete, in a more affable tone. "I've often wondered how ye came it over 'im so slick."

"I told him," said Sime, with a thin chuckle, "that I had a private understanding with the Governor and would get him pardoned out in six months. I said that after that you and I would work together in the woods and let him run the store; that both of us were convinced that he was true blue and would rather die than go back on us. He was wavering and uncertain when I went to see him, but after that nothing could induce him to speak. There is little doubt but that, if he had done so, the court would have dealt more leniently with him. In some respects I think he is the most gullible man I've ever known."

"That was neatly done. I always said you had a great head, Sime," was Pete's admiring comment. "Well, here's a pretty go," he added, as he climbed into the wagon.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm in a scrape."

"A scrape?" repeated Simon, nervously.

"Yes, I've lost my whip."

"Your whip?"

"Yes, it isn't here."

"Are you sure you had it?"

"Sartin I did. I used it back in the woods a piece."

"Well, that's probably where you lost it. Here, take my lantern and hunt for it when you go back."

"I tell ye 't would be a bad thing if thet is found," said Pete, anxiously.

"Why?"

"My name's on it."

"Your name on it!" exclaimed Simon, in a tone of alarm. "What in the name o' common sense do you carry a whip like that on these trips for? All is, we must find it."

The two drove slowly off, turning the lantern first to one side of the road and then to the other. When they had passed out of sight and hearing, the boys hurried forth from their place of concealment. It was evident that they were very much elated over what they had heard.

"Thank goodness, we've got through camping here," said Ned, gleefully, as he gathered up the reins.

"Yes," added Raymond, "and we have the inside track for that reward."

"What shall we do now?"

"Well, I think we had better do a little detective work at the other end of this business. I should like very much to see that 'scoop' Pete spoke of."

"So should I."

"We sha'n't want to do anything, though, until we have thought the whole matter over and carefully laid our plans."

"Of course not," assented Ned; "that would be foolish."

"The men who are helping Pete in his smuggling

work are probably rough, desperate fellows," continued Raymond, "and it would be apt to go hard with us if they should catch us spying on them."

"You don't suppose they'd kill us, do you?" asked Ned, a little apprehensively.

"I don't know. It looks to me as if a man who would burn a barn to revenge himself for the killing of a worthless dog wouldn't hesitate to take human life if he were driven into close quarters."

"I think so, too. It seemed strange to me that Pete should burn your grandfather's barn for what you did. That was taking revenge on your grandfather, not on you."

"Yes, that's so; but men of his stamp never stop to reason. What we have seen to-night has shown us pretty conclusively that Pete Atkins is capable of nothing in that line. Simon Dart has furnished the brains and done the thinking for him. If he hadn't old Pete would have been in prison years ago."

"I guess that's true enough."

"When that old rascal burned our barn," continued Raymond, "he thought he would hit both grandfather and myself. He probably knew that I owned part of the live stock."

"But why should he want to injure your grandfather?"

"He has always had a grudge against him. Grandfather, you know, is pretty radical in his temperance views, and has never hesitated to speak his mind pretty

freely about the evil old Pete is doing in this town. Probably Pete was only too glad of a chance to do him an injury, while he was squaring up his grudge against me."

"It won't do for us to take any chances with fellows like him if we go to Letter K."

"Not at all. We must act cautiously, and go prepared to defend ourselves in case of necessity."

There were two happy boys who fell asleep in Raymond's den at broad daylight that morning, to dream of well-considered plans which were to close the criminal career of old Pete Atkins.

CHAPTER XXIV

FOLLOWING UP THE CLUE

"Well, boys, I suppose you'll bring back Ezra Johnston's catamount when you return," said Grandfather Benson, smilingly, as he watched Raymond and Ned drive out of the yard for a "hunting trip" to Letter K, Byer Ames accompanying them to bring back the team.

"Perhaps we'll find larger game," responded Raymond.

"Oh, yes, I forgot your famous skill as a bear killer," said Mr. Benson, with a merry twinkle in his eye. "Be very sure you trap your game before you shoot it, though."

"We'll attend to that," was Raymond's laughing response; but Ned knew that his words had a deeper significance than Grandfather Benson suspected.

"Perhaps he'll see more meaning in what you said later on," he whispered.

"I hope so."

"It won't be our fault if he doesn't."

"What mischief are you two plotting?" asked Byer, uneasily.

"We are after the Letter K devil."

"Well, you'll have to go down to the Atkins place for that. Old Ezra Johnston found it there."

"You really think the old fellow was drunk when he made that discovery, do you?" asked Raymond, availing himself of the opportunity to change the drift of the conversation.

"Of course he was."

"Well, that's the way it seemed to me."

"You needn't be afraid that we shall follow his example," added Ned, jokingly.

"See here, boys, you are trying to keep something back from me," said Byer, with a searching glance at the faces of his companions. "You've some scheme afoot that you don't want any one to know about. I think I can surmise what it is without much trouble."

"I think very likely you can, old fellow," was Raymond's smiling response; "but if you have any suspicions please keep them to yourself."

"Of course I will. You must have found out by this time that you can count on me."

It was evident that Byer felt a little hurt at the apparent lack of confidence on the part of his companions.

"I certainly have, Byer," protested Raymond, warmly, "and I know that if you suspect the purpose of this trip you can be depended upon not to reveal it. I don't want grandfather and grandmother to be worried about us."

"They won't be on my account," declared Byer,

"but you must be careful, boys," he added, uneasily.
"Don't do anything rash."

"We'll look out for that," said Raymond, confidently.

"Yes, we sha'n't take any foolish chances," added Ned.

Their ride was soon over, and having charged Byer to return for them in three days, they started in the best of spirits down the tote road that led to Amos Dole's old lumber camp. They paused a moment at the spot where Cobe Hersom's bear had so nearly made an end of good-natured Joel Webber, and where Raymond's lucky shot had come just in the nick of time to save the big fellow from serious consequences.

"I tell you, it was pretty exciting about the time he knocked Joel into those bushes," said Ned. "I never expected to see him come out alive again. I thought sure he was done for."

Raymond broke into a hearty laugh. "I never can hold in when I think of the sorry figure Joel cut," he said. "I believe I should have laughed just the same if it had killed him. He looked so comical."

"He took it good-naturedly enough," said Ned, "but I'll bet he'd have given fifty dollars about the time he crawled out of those firs if he hadn't been so free in bantering us."

"I guess he'd have given more than that."

"Perhaps he would."

"The more I see of that thing," said Raymond, "the more I'm convinced that it doesn't pay to have sport at

the expense of others. Sooner or later they are sure to get the laugh back on you with interest."

"I guess that's about so," assented Ned.

The boys found the road, which was an excellent one in winter when it was covered with deep snows and constantly traversed by heavy teams going to and from the camp, an exceedingly difficult one for fall travel. Boulders, stumps and muck holes were numerous, and there were stretches of corduroy, the roughly laid logs of which, broken and upheaved by the frosts, made progress extremely tedious.

"Well, I'm about willing to turn back," said Ned, in disgust. "I begin to think that we have taken the wrong view of old Pete, after all."

"Why so?"

"If he lugs things out of here, 'pon my soul I believe that he fully earns them by the sweat of his brow."

"Most likely he does," answered Raymond. "Men like him will work a great deal harder to be knaves than they would have to if they were honest citizens."

"That's so," assented Ned. "It's cost Simon Dart more a good many times to cheat folks out of things than it would to have paid cash for them."

"No doubt of it; but he wouldn't feel at home with anything that came into his possession honestly."

"Of course he wouldn't. He's never so happy as when planning some knavery."

"Yes, he's always trying to get what he hasn't earned; but we'll bring him to the end of his rope before long."

“ We’ll try hard enough.”

By the time the boys had made eight miles they were pretty well wearied, and the haversacks in which they carried their provisions seemed loaded with lead. Even their double-barreled shot-guns appeared to have assumed the weight of Springfield rifles. They saw by the sun that it was nearly noon, and, withdrawing to a hard-wood ridge a little way from the road, soon had a cheerful fire going.

“ Do you suppose Pete or his gang will see this smoke? ” asked Ned, as they sat before it disposing of a portion of the generous supply of provisions which Grandmother Benson had put up for them.

“ No,” replied Raymond, “ and if they did it wouldn’t make any difference. They meet visitors with a bold face. Simon Dart has a permit to cut cedar on this township, and his men are at work at the camp. I’ve no doubt they will receive us very cordially if we go there.”

“ Had we better do it? ”

“ No, I think not, openly. We shall be able to discover more if they don’t suspect we are around. I’ll tell you what, Ned,” he added, “ I believe it would be well for us to separate and work up to the camp from different sides. If that ‘scoop’ Pete spoke of is in the neighborhood of the clearing, we’d stand a good deal better chance to stumble onto it.”

“ All right,” responded Ned. “ I’ll meet you behind the horse hovel at two o’clock. There’s a clump of

scrub firs just across the brook. You can hide in those, or I will, if I get there first. We can time ourselves so as to arrive there nearly together. Two low whistles will make a good signal for us, if we should have occasion to use one. We shall have to be pretty careful how we use them, though."

"All right," said Raymond. "I'll have it in mind."

Ned moved off through the cedars and firs upon one side of the road, and Raymond through those that skirted the other side. "I believe I'll get to the camp a little ahead of Ned," he thought. "It will give me a better chance to reconnoiter there." His reflections were startled by a rabbit, which dashed from the bushes almost under his feet and speedily disappeared in the forest depths. In an instant Raymond's gun was at his shoulder, and his finger almost pressed the trigger for a quick shot. He changed his mind, however, and put the weapon back under his arm again. "It would be foolish," he muttered, "to let them know some one is near and put them on their guard."

With the utmost caution he worked his way through the tangled thickets, and about one o'clock in the afternoon found himself in the dense clump of firs that stood on the opposite side of the brook behind the horse hovel at the Dole camp.

So far as Raymond could see, no changes had been made in this structure since he and Ned occupied it on the occasion of their deer hunt. It was certainly not an imposing edifice, but those who had lived in it found

a fascination attaching to its wild life that only those who have tasted such world-free existence can know or understand.

The horse hovel, a long, low building, divided into a stable and hay-loft by cedar splits laid on rough poles, stood next to the camp and almost adjoining it.

Raymond, from his place of concealment across the brook, could catch the murmur of voices in front of the camp, but could neither see who were speaking nor hear what was said. Unable to endure longer the suspense of waiting, he stole silently and cautiously from his hiding-place and crept down into the brook, where, by utilizing some large stones in the bed of the channel, he managed to make the opposite bank without wetting his feet.

Here he paused for a moment to consider what course he had better pursue. He did not dare to go around to the door of the hovel, since it would expose him to the view of the men in front of the camp. He knew very well that if they should discover him, under such circumstances, his reception would be far from pleasant. Pete and his gang, in the face of the reward that had been offered for their apprehension, would be in no mood to trifle. They were desperate fellows, and might very likely resort to desperate expedients if the situation appeared to demand them. Raymond fully appreciated the importance of acting with the greatest caution. After a moment's reflection, he carefully put his gun and haversack through one of the small windows behind the

horse stalls, and slowly and quietly worked his way in after them.

Once in the hovel he experienced a thrill of exultation, and felt that he was well on the way to success in his hazardous undertaking. The loft was reached by a short ladder. This Raymond pulled up behind him after gaining that place of concealment. "With my shot-gun and revolver I could hold this loft against a small army," he thought, as he gazed around on its dingy walls.

It was a cheerless place. Through great cracks in the roof splits above he could catch a glimpse of the cold November sky. The wind found its way into the apartment from a number of holes between the logs where the chinking, never very carefully done, had worked entirely out. In one back corner was a small pile of loose hay, which had evidently been left over from the last lumber operation. This Raymond piled carefully up in the front corner towards the camp. Burying himself in it he applied his eye to a large hole between the logs, and saw a sight that filled him with intense satisfaction. Hard at work, astride the rude bench used for the purpose, was Ike Wallace, busily employed with a draw-shave in converting cedar splits into shingles. On a short cedar log near him sat old Pete Atkins, holding a Winchester rifle in his hands, and evidently in a very dejected frame of mind.

"It's no use, Ike," he said, dolefully. "I'm afraid I'll have t' pull out. Matters are gettin' hot for me

round here. There's a terrible scramblin' arter thet reward. More'n half a dozen fellers shadowed me out o' the Corner this mornin,' but I threw 'em off the track by strikin' into the Bell woods. They found pretty quick thet they couldn't keep me in sight. There are few men who can follow me in the timber if I do say it," he added, with an accent of pride.

"I don't see what ye need be scared at," said Wallace, looking up from his work with an air of disgust. "Nobody can ever find the scoop, an' as long as ye lay low an' make no trips across the line, I don't see how they can trap ye. You're sartinly not obliged to lay yourself liable till matters get quieted down a little. It isn't any crime for ye t' stay here an' hunt, is it? If the officers or bounty hunters come t' visit us, all is we'll take 'em right into the camp and use 'em jest as hand-somely as we know how. I tell ye, Pete, there's nothing in the world like a good dinner t' kill a man's suspicions agin ye. I took the stings all out o' them Corner fellers. It's lucky for us, though, thet their noses weren't any longer."

"You're a good un on them matters, Ike," said Pete, approvingly. "I'll trust ye t' look after 'em any time. I can't say, though, as I like thet young Frenchman o' yourn."

"Why not?"

"He's pesky rattle-headed an' hasn't any more jedgment 'n a goose. I feel narvous to hev 'im a hangin' round me. I never know what t' expect from 'im. I

hev never found a man for this business t' equal Jean Gambier. He knew how t' do his work well an' keep his mouth shet."

"Thet's so; he was a good one," assented Ike.

"He didn't need no compass t' come an' go with," continued Pete. "He seemed t' know jest where he was the darkest night, an' could follow a trail so blind that the rest on us couldn't make nothin' on it. Ye hearn tell, I s'pose, how he found the cookee,* the spring he was on the drive for Amos Dole, didn't ye?"

"Dunno's I ever did," admitted Ike.

"They sent him out from the camp at noon with a big bucket o' lunch for the men who was t' work 'bout two miles down the stream. When he didn't show up they knowed o' course thet suthin' was wrong, so they took Jean off his work an' set 'im t' huntin' for 'im. He found 'im the next afternoon, 'bout six miles away, a-tearin' through the woods like a crazy man. I don't believe thet feller rally knew which end he was a-standin' on."

"There's nuthin' 'll rattle a greenhorn like gittin' lost 'n the deep woods," declared Ike.

"Sure's gospel," assented Pete, "an' it beats all what plumb foolish things they'll do—don't seem t' have no sense at all. Why, when Jean found thet 'ere cookee he was holdin' on t' thet bucket like grim death. There was grub enough in it for a good-sized crew, but he

* The assistant cook in a lumber camp.

hadn't even lifted the cover. Ye can jest bet the stuff inside was a sight—all mushed t' pieces, an' yet thet feller was nigh starved t' death. 'Bout the first thing he asked Jean for was suthin' t' eat."

Pete broke into a guffaw at the recollection.

"Jest like 'em," grinned Ike. "They jest clean lose their wits quick's they think they're lost—thet is, the most on 'em."

"Jean asked 'im why he hadn't eaten some o' the stuff in the bucket," continued Pete, "an' he allowed he hadn't thought on it."

"No more he did," chuckled Ike. "He was so mighty rattled he couldn't think o' nothin'."

Pete's heavy features grew dark.

"Jean was the only man in thet outfit as could a found 'im so quick," he declared, "an' now we've lost 'im."

"It's too bad," said Ike, regretfully.

"O' course it's too bad!" exclaimed Pete, wrathfully. "It jest makes me sick when I think o' thet meddlesome boy! If it hadn't bin for 'im, Jean ud be with me now."

"Thet's so, but I don't see how the boy is t' blame," returned Ike. "Seem 's if I'd drop anybody thet I ketched burnin' my barn, if I had a shootin'-iron in my hands. Ye made a bad break there, Pete. Ye oughter listened t' my advice."

"Perhaps so, but if you'd had an upstart boy shoot the best dog in Chestnut, an' then threaten t' draw a

bead on you with a gun, I don't think you'd have felt very pleasant 'bout it, Ike. 'Pon my soul, if I'd struck the young cub I haven't a doubt but what he'd peppered me."

"Not much doubt o' thet, I guess," responded Ike, with conviction.

CHAPTER XXV

RAYMOND IS MADE A PRISONER

It was evident that the Chestnut rumseller was very ill at ease. He paced restlessly up and down in front of the camp for several moments, muttering to himself, and occasionally giving vent to a half-smothered oath.

"D' ye know," he said, presently, pausing abruptly in front of Ike Wallace, "es how thet pesky little bantam is a makin' things mighty nasty for me?"

"He's sartinly an active little cuss," conceded Ike.

"He's too active for his own good," growled Pete. "I tell ye what, Ike, I'll pare his spurs afore I'm done with 'im, or my name ain't Pete Atkins."

"Don't git rash, Pete," cautioned Ike.

"Git rash!" repeated Pete, contemptuously. "Ye gin me a pain, Ike. I'd a blamed sight ruther git rash 'n git jugged."

"'T won't be very hard t' git both," said Ike, dryly. "I've noticed es how one gin'rally followed t'other."

"What bothers me most o' all is the loss o' Gambier," continued Pete, ignoring the remark. "I'd sort o' come t' depend on 'im. He knew suthin'—he did. Allus had a plan afoot t' git round everything es come along. Why, it was his idee thet run out George

Fields an' Bill Stetson when they come here a year or two ago on a trappin' expedition," and Pete's rugged features expanded into a broad grin at the recollection.

"I knew they got scared out o' here," said Ike, "but I allus s'picioned es how they really did hear some varmint—a lynx, or some other critter."

"I guess most people thought so, didn't they?"

"Thet was the gen'ral idee."

"Well, they didn't hear nothin' o' the sort," grinned Pete. "Jean an' me worked thet little racket. Ye see, Amos Dole started in a-cuttin' timber on the East Branch thet fall, an' Jean an' me, knowin' es how he probably wouldn't use this camp agin for some years, took hold an' fitted it up for business. We'd jest got the scoop done an' well filled with collateral when those fellers got along. I tell ye, I felt sick; but Jean, he sized 'em up an' suggested an Injun devil scare. I didn't cotton t' the idee at fust, but he allowed es how it wouldn't do no harm t' try it, so o' course I gin in. About twelve o'clock we opened on the boys. I never had such a circus in all my born days. Jean got behind thet large birch beyond the brook, an' I took t' the shade of thet big spruce on t'other side o' the clearin'. Ye see, we didn't want t' take any chances in case they should shoot. But we needn't have gin ourselves any uneasiness on thet score. They didn't have sperit enough, arter we started in on 'em, t' pull a trigger. I never saw the nerve so completely knocked out o' two fellers in my life. Jean would fetch a screech from his

side o' the clearin', an' a minute later I would answer it from my side. We had made up our minds t' gin 'em a night on it, so we whooped 'er up till nigh five o'clock in the mornin'. Es soon es it was daylight those fellers lost no time in vamoosin' the ranch, an' nobody bothered us agin all winter."

"Well, thet was pretty neat, I declare," laughed Ike. "D' ye know, Pete, I reckon es how boldness is the very best concealment for this sort o' bis'ness."

"I guess you're right there. It was all thet saved me an' Jean once. We had jest come over the line with three packs for the scoop, an' had thrown 'em down on one of the bunks, thinkin' we wouldn't stow 'em away till after supper. While we was buildin' a fire who should come t' the camp but Rufe Brown's boy an' a cousin o' his—a Portland feller, I believe."

"Well, I swan!" was Ike's interested reply. "What did ye do?"

"Why, we treated 'em jest es perlite 's if they'd been nabobs. We invited 'em right into camp an' insisted they should hev some supper with us. Arter thet was eaten Jean an' me went out in the horse hovel t' hev a smoke an' talk over matters a little. We agreed 't would be easy enough t' git rid on 'em. They evidently felt thet we had the fust claim t' the camp an' wouldn't think o' stayin' in it 'thout an invite from us. We concluded, though, thet if they was goin' t' remain in the neighborhood for two or three days, es their packs indicated, we'd better insist upon their stayin' right

there. We'd know where they were then, an' could watch 'em, but if they should go an' build a camp o' their own, they'd be twice es apt t' stumble on us when we shouldn't want t' see 'em."

"Thet was a sensible way o' lookin' at it," said Ike, approvingly.

"Jean wanted t' try the Injun devil scare on 'em, but I knew 't wouldn't work. No boy could be the son o' Rufe Brown an' not hev pluck, an' the cousin looked 's if he'd considerable backbone, too. I saw 't once they was two very different fellers from George Fields an' Bill Stetson. The idee of 'n Injun devil would make 'em stay longer. We invited 'em t' make the camp their headquarters while they stayed in the neighborhood an' not mind us at all; we said we should be gone a good deal, huntin' an' visitin' some traps which we gin 'em t' understand we'd sot."

"So they stayed a spell with ye, did they?"

"Yes, thet night. 'Bout three o'clock in the mornin' when they was fast asleep in the mess camp, Jean an' I lugged the packs into the hovel an' covered 'em up with hay. Then we cleared out across the line. When we come back the next night the boys was gone. I don't believe, though, they suspected anything. I wish I could say es much for thet deputy collector who was in the court-house when young Brown gin his testimony at the arson trial."

"He saw through the hole in the grindstone, did he?"

"Well, I should surmise he did, from the look that come over his face. I sot right where I could git the full benefit on it, too."

"Perhaps he will be down here to look things over," suggested Ike, uneasily.

"Most likely he will be," admitted Pete.

At this interesting stage of the conversation between Pete and Ike a startling mishap befell Raymond, who, as we may well believe, had been a very interested listener. In his working about to get a better view of the speakers, the cross pole which supported that portion of the loft floor slipped from its bearings, precipitating Raymond with considerable force, and no little racket, into the horse stall below, and nearly burying him beneath a pile of hay and chaff. Before he could scramble to his feet, old Pete, with an exclamation of astonishment and rage, had bounded into the hovel and seized him by the collar with a grip that indicated a determination not to lose him.

"Ben a-spyin' on us, hev ye?" he hissed through his clenched teeth. "A-playin' o' the sneak an' stickin' your nose into other folk's bis'ness."

Pete's face was fairly livid with passion. He held Raymond out at arm's length and shook him with a vigor that made the boy's head dizzy, and the surrounding objects dance before his eyes with blurry indistinctness.

"By the great horn spoon! I'll gin ye a lesson in manners," he roared. "Come round here a-doin' the

Old Sleuth act, be ye? Want some fun, hey? Wal, by ginger, ye can hev it. 'T won't be my fault if ye don't git a blamed sight more on it 'n ye planned for."

With these words the brawny smuggler jerked Raymond through the door of the hovel and dragged him in front of the camp, to Ike's unbounded amazement.

"Wh—what's this mean?" he demanded, in uncertain tones. "Who ye got there?"

"This is Slink-eyed Jim, the boy detective," responded Pete, grimly.

"Looks t' me like Andrew Benson's grandson," asserted Ike. "What ye doin' with 'im?"

"This 'ere young cub 's bin a-hidin' in the hovel an' spyin' on us," asserted Pete. "He wants excitement an' adventure. He's a sort o' pirut, he is," he added, with withering sarcasm.

"How d' ye come in the hovel?" demanded Ike of Raymond. His manner was agitated, and it was plain to be seen that he was decidedly nervous over the unexpected turn of events.

"I was looking the camp over a little," explained Raymond. "I thought—"

"Tell the truth," interposed Pete, savagely. "You was playin' the sneak—thet's what ye was a-doin', ye young cur. It's no use a-trying t' palaver round us. We're on t' your little game. How many others are with ye?"

"I'll leave that for you to find out," responded Raymond, defiantly. "I warn you that you are taking

mighty long chances. My friends won't be fooled in this matter, and you'll hear from them considerably sooner than you expect to."

"Ye better go a trifle slow, Pete," advised Ike Wallace, nervously.

"Shet up!" was the gruff response. "Ye make me tired, Ike—a grown man a-settin' there an' lettin' this kid bluff ye."

"You'll find it isn't so much bluff as you think," asserted Raymond.

"Oh, it isn't, hey?" sneered Pete. "Now jest put a stopper on thet jaw o' yourn. We've had 'bout all the chin music we keer t' hear."

"You're going to hear a number of things you won't like," declared Raymond, defiantly.

"Dry up, I tell ye," commanded Pete, angrily. "There's a sight more starch in ye now 'n will be a little later. Your bringin' up 's been mightily neglected; but we'll undertake t' larn ye a thing or two afore we git through with ye. S'pose ye come down here on purpose t' git acquainted with me, didn't ye?"

"That's about the size of it," assented Raymond.

"Oh, ho! ye did, hey? Wal, I'll gin ye a good chance; nothin' small or mean 'bout me—except the size o' my feet. Oh, won't ye hev fun, though! Shouldn't wonder a mite if ye found it a durned sight more excitin' nor a circus," and Pete indulged a grim laugh that showed Raymond very plainly that he need look for little mercy at the hands of his captor.

"Fetch me some o' thet rope, Ike," continued the smuggler chief, tightening his grip upon the collar of Raymond's coat.

In response to this order Ike hurried into the camp, and returned with a roll of the tarred rope used in bunching shingles.

"Tie him," commanded Pete, briefly.

Ike was about to obey this order when a most unexpected thing happened. With a quick motion Raymond slid out of his coat, and leaving it still firmly grasped in Pete's iron grip he started across the clearing at a breakneck pace.

"Hi there! Hold on, I say!" shouted the astonished rumseller, when he awoke to a full realization of what had happened. "Stop 'im! Ketch 'im, Ike."

"Ketch 'im yourself," growled Ike, disgustedly.

By this time Raymond had reached the brook and was making his way over the long fir log which served as a foot-bridge below the ford.

"Stop! Stop, I tell ye!" commanded Pete, as he raced madly after him.

Raymond did not pause to look around, but he could tell by the long bounds he heard behind him that the big smuggler was making tremendous headway, and he could well imagine that he was in no enviable frame of mind.

"Stop, or I'll—I'll shoot ye!" roared the big rumseller; but Raymond paid no attention to the threat.

He was nearly across the log, and was about to jump

upon the opposite bank of the brook, when Pete gave the tree a mighty shove with his foot from the opposite end. As a result it swung lengthwise into the stream, and Raymond, losing his balance, fell sprawling over a slippery boulder into the cold current. Before he could regain his feet the big rumseller had dashed into the brook and gripped him savagely by the arm.

"I'll—I'll make ye smart for this," he panted, fiercely.

Raymond, who was breathing hard from his exertions, made no reply to this threat, and Pete dragged him roughly back to camp.

"I reckon ye won't git loose agin," he declared, as he seized Raymond by both ears with a grip that made the boy wince.

"Put thet coat back, Ike," said the big smuggler, gruffly, and the order was promptly obeyed. "Now tie 'im up," he continued, "an' tie 'im up t' stay."

Ike hastened to do as directed, although it was evident that he had little stomach for the task. Raymond was speedily bound hand and foot. While this was being done Pete never for a moment released his grip upon Raymond's ears, and the boy felt like a pigmy in his powerful grasp.

"Now jest run through his pockets an' see what ye find," commanded Pete, when Ike had tied the last knot. Raymond's pockets were quickly rifled, and a seven-shooter revolver and a clasp-knife brought to light.

"Ye carry quite an arsenal, I see," sneered Pete.

"Oh, you're a reg'lar ring-tailed snorter—thet's very evident. Now what was you a-plannin' t' do with them things?"

"Defend myself, if I had a chance to use them," said Raymond, coolly, determined to put on as bold a front as possible.

"Oh, you were, hey? Wal, we'll take care on 'em for ye," said Pete. "Mebbe they'll be used jest the same, though," he added, significantly.

Raymond made no reply, wisely concluding that it would not be best, under the circumstances, to irritate his captor further.

"See here, Ike," continued Pete, "jest take thet clasp-knife an' cut me a stout birch withe."

"Hol' on, Pete," cried Ike, in alarm. "What ye intend t' do?"

"I'm going t' take a little o' the dust out o' this young cub's jacket."

"No, ye won't," was the decided rejoinder.

"Why not?"

"Because I tell ye I won't be a party t' anything o' the sort."

"He isn't as anxious as you are to pass the rest of his days at Thomaston," said Raymond.

He saw in Ike's refusal to resort to unnecessary violence the key to his own safety, and determined to strengthen the old man in that position by working upon his fear of the law.

"Don't open thet jaw o' yourn agin," said Pete, with

a rough shake, divining his purpose. "If ye do, I'll shet your wind off in a way ye won't like."

He spoke too late, however. Old Ike Wallace had a profound respect for the strong arm of the law. He had, moreover, no feeling against Raymond, and did not intend to be concerned, unnecessarily, in his violent usage. He flatly refused to carry out Pete's order, and with a savage oath and evident reluctance the latter was compelled to relinquish his purpose.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TABLES TURNED

"I wish Jean Gambier was here," exclaimed Pete, in very evident sincerity. "He is wuth a dozen sech knock-kneed, chicken-hearted fellers es you."

It was evident that the Chestnut rumseller felt very much disgusted with the refusal of Ike Wallace to assist him in giving Raymond a flogging.

"Shouldn't wonder a mite if he was at this kind o' bis'ness," was Ike's dogged response, "an' he's got t' the place where sech fellers 'most allus fetch up. If ye take me fer a man o' his make you're mightily mistaken, thet's all. What ye goin' t' do with thet 'ere boy?"

"I haint decided yet. One thing is sartin, though. I sha'n't let 'im go."

"Wal, mebbe you'd better keep 'im out here in front o' the camp," said Ike, sharply. "Somebody's liable to drop in on us 'most any time, an' it would be an awful interestin' sight for 'em."

"You're right, Ike," assented Pete. "We can't keep 'im here. Go in an' open up the scoop."

"Well, I guess I'm going to learn more about Pete's dugout than I ever mapped out to," was Raymond's

reflection, as his captor dragged him into the camp. Here he was held a moment while Ike Wallace revealed the mystery of Pete's hiding-place. The boughs on one of the bunks were scraped away, and the plank flooring beneath exposed to view. This was, to all appearances, securely nailed to the heavy sleepers beneath with large spikes. In this case, however, appearances were deceitful. Inserting an iron bar under the edge of the flooring, Ike quickly threw it upon its side, showing that it was held together on the under side by heavy cross cleats securely screwed on. Beneath this flooring was revealed a cellar, or rather hole, about ten feet square, and nowhere within four feet of the outer edge of the camp, around which ran a heavy embankment of earth. It would have been difficult to conceive of a better hiding-place. It was about six feet deep, and was reached by a short ladder. Down this Ike led the way with a lighted lantern, and Pete followed with Raymond.

The interior of the scoop was not at all inviting. It was dark and clammy, and Raymond shuddered in spite of himself at the thought of being confined in its dismal gloom. Its sides were studded with heavy cedar logs placed on end, and set closely together to prevent the earth from caving in. The floor was of a similar construction.

"Wal, take a good look at it," said Pete, roughly. "It's likely t' be your home for some time t' come."

"Perhaps it may, and then again it may not,"

responded Raymond, defiantly, but at the same time his heart sank within him, and he would have given all he possessed at that moment to have been safely back under Grandfather Benson's roof.

There was nothing in the scoop save a few empty boxes and casks. It was evident that Pete had decided to call a halt in his nefarious business until the storm which had gathered at the arson trial should blow over.

"It won't do for this 'ere boy to lie in them wet trousers," declared Ike. "He'd ketch his death o' cold."

"You needn't be too tender on 'im, Ike," protested Pete, roughly. "He'll be all right if they dry on 'im."

"They're not likely t' dry here very soon," insisted Ike. "I've got some dry duds up-stairs—not quite so tony as his, I'll allow, but 't any rate they're clean. I guess I'll go an' fetch 'em."

"Wal, git 'em if ye want t' coddle 'im," snapped Pete, "but I'm a-tellin' on ye thet it's all blamed nonsense."

Ike hurried up the ladder and returned a moment later with a heavy pair of drawers, some home-knit woolen stockings and a pair of trousers, somewhat faded and patched, but warm and comfortable.

Pete reluctantly allowed Raymond to be untied sufficiently to put them on, after which he was promptly bound again with the shingle rope.

"There," said Ike, when the change had been effected, "I snum, I'll feel a little better 'bout this."

"You're 'n old woman, Ike," declared Pete, contemptuously, but his companion, having had his own way, wisely forbore to take offense at the slurring remark.

"Here, lay 'im on this," he said, spreading upon the floor one of the heavy woolen blankets which he had brought to the scoop when he first came down the ladder.

"One o' them's enough," growled Pete.

"I reckon not," was the decided rejoinder, as Ike spread the second blanket over Raymond, where Pete had lain him as if he had been a log. Never before in his life had Raymond experienced such a desolate feeling of utter helplessness. Pete and Ike ascended the ladder. He heard the heavy flooring replaced. The faint light that streamed into the scoop from the camp was cut off. He was startled by the overwhelming realization that he was alone and a helpless prisoner in an underground apartment where even his shouts would fail to reach the outside world, or, should they do so, would fail to meet with any response.

"I got out of it better than I expected to when I first felt Pete's grip on me," he reflected. "I was afraid that he would shoot me on the spot. I believe he would have done it, too, if old Ike hadn't been with him. Well, I shall have to make the best of it, but if there's any way of getting out of this place I'm going to discover it."

He strained with all his strength upon his bonds, but

it was of no use. Old Ike had done his work well, and the hard knots refused to give. Raymond lay very quietly for a few minutes trying to conjure up some way out of his difficulty. There was something terribly oppressive about the scoop. Its atmosphere was heavy with mouldy odors. The light and sounds of the outside world were completely shut off. "It's a regular tomb," he muttered, as his eyes sought in vain to penetrate its darkness. "And what," he thought with a shudder, "if old Pete should make it mine!"

At this moment a sharp gnawing upon one of the empty boxes broke the stillness of the place, and brought a new terror to Raymond.

"Can it be possible that this place is infested with rats?" he thought, with a feeling of horror, recalling some of the frightful tales he had read concerning the ferocity of these rodents in attacking even human life, when in large numbers and under the pressure of hunger. He raised his voice and shouted aloud. Immediately the gnawing ceased and the scamper of small feet told how groundless were his fears. The intruder had been a mouse. "I guess there are no rats here," muttered Raymond, with a sigh of intense relief, feeling his courage return again. "I wonder if these ropes will give any," he soliloquized, as he gave his arms another pull to determine more fully the tightness of the knots.

Raymond's hands were crossed and bound behind his

back. After experimenting a little he presently found that by rolling one wrist a little he could reach with his fingers the rope that held them together. A thrill of exultation ran through him at the discovery. He carefully worked one of the strands of the rope loose, and to his great joy succeeded in breaking it. His spirits, which had been at a low ebb, rose again at this outlook for escape. With feverish haste he began to break the small strands. But he soon found that the task was one that called for great patience. He had never realized before how many threads there were even in a small shingle rope. It seemed to him that he was making no headway at all. Each little strand resisted him tenaciously, as if determined to do its part in keeping him in captivity. His fingers grew stiff, and he was at times forced to give up his work and rest them.

At length, however, he learned patience, and found that, by going slowly, he was able to keep steadily at his task. Before long he felt, with a thrill of hope, that he was making headway. The rope grew gradually smaller, until at length by a violent effort he burst its remaining strands. It took him but a moment to untie the cords that bound his legs. So far as his limbs were concerned he was free, but notwithstanding this, he was still a prisoner. To be sure, he could probably go up the ladder and lift the flooring with his shoulders, but he felt that this would not be a wise move. He would be almost certain to run across Pete or Ike, and knew

very well that if they had occasion to bind him a second time he would not be able to free himself.

While he was reflecting what course to pursue, he heard the iron bar inserted under the flooring above. It opened and closed again, and a moment later Raymond saw Tom Atkins descending the ladder. A lantern swung from his arm, and in one hand he carried a tin plate with a few pieces of hardtack, and in the other a tin can filled with water. Raymond lost no time in pulling the blanket over him, and reassuming the position in which Pete had left him.

"Well, you're a pretty duck!" exclaimed Tom, as he held his lantern above his head and gazed down upon Raymond with a malignant leer.

"Very likely I am, at present—by comparison," was Raymond's cool rejoinder.

"I reckon it'll pay you to keep a civil tongue in your head," said Tom, angrily.

"And it might return you good interest, in the long run, to do the same," rejoined Raymond, with exasperating composure.

"Shet up!" commanded Tom, sharply. "Don't you dare give me any o' your sass. I tell you I won't stan' it."

"You're a mighty brave fellow," said Raymond, sarcastically. "I'm not sure but that you might muster up pluck enough to kick a lame dog—if he was tied."

"Not another word!" cried Tom, menacingly. "I

tell you you're up against the real thing this time. Dad is the wrong man to buck against; if you don't wish you'd never seen him before you get out of this scrape I miss my guess."

"You and your father are two of a kind," declared Raymond, with spirit. "You've had the advantages of a better education, if you'd known how to use them; but, otherwise, you're even less of a man than he is."

"Go on! Dance away if you think best," growled Tom. "You'll have to pay the fiddler with compound interest before you're very much older."

"You may have a little account of your own to settle," declared Raymond, defiantly.

"It's all very well for you to talk big," said Tom, with a sneering laugh. "It will keep your courage up. If it doesn't, you might whistle a little for a change. Old Ike Wallace thought I was mighty willing to bring the grub for you. I had a reason, though, that he didn't know about. I haven't forgotten the mean trick you played on me when you got Joel Webber to drop me from the counter in Copeland's store. You thought you were doing something awful smart."

"That was your own fault," declared Raymond, warmly. "If you hadn't played the sneak it wouldn't have happened."

"Was I obliged to make a fool of myself just to give you and your cronies a chance to laugh at me, I'd like to know?" demanded Tom, angrily.

"No, but you wasn't obliged, either, to make a Paul

Pry of yourself, and give away the boys' fun to the men in the store."

"Well, I must say that I admire your nerve," declared Tom, with a scornful laugh. "The idea of a fellow caught eavesdropping, as you were, talking about Paul Pry! You make me weary."

"No," declared Raymond, "you were born so."

"It would be better for you if you weren't quite so flip," retorted Tom. "Now you think perhaps that you are going to get these hardtack and this water?"

"I didn't ask for them," interposed Raymond, proudly.

"Oh, no! Of course you didn't. You're a mighty independent fellow, you are. It'll be a mighty long while between meals for you if I have my way. I'll place this grub on the box here. No doubt you'll find the smell of it very refreshing," and Tom laughed heartily at his own sense of humor. "There's just one thing to be done before I leave you," he added, as he placed the lantern upon a keg and produced a stout switch from under his coat.

"What do you intend to do with that?" demanded Raymond, sharply.

"I intend to do the job father was going to do."

"You wouldn't be coward enough to strike a fellow when he's as defenseless as I am, would you?"

"There isn't any question of bravery with me in this affair," said Tom. "All is, I owe you a good thrashing, and I'm going to give it to you."



“HELP! MURDER! HELP!” HE SHOUTED A MOMENT LATER.
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"Don't you dare to strike me with that switch," cried Raymond, warningly.

"But I will dare," was the defiant answer, as Tom stooped to pull the blanket from him.

"Help! Murder! Help!" he shouted a moment later, in genuine surprise and terror. A most unexpected thing had happened. As he pulled the blanket away, Raymond seemed to rise with it, and grasping Tom firmly by the hair of the head, threw him forward upon his face with a force that almost knocked the breath out of him. Then, jumping astride of him, he fastened a grip upon his throat that effectually shut off his cries for help.

"You don't intend to choke me to death, do you?" gasped Tom, in genuine terror. Like most boys of his peculiar class he was an abject coward, and now that he found himself in a tight place he was thoroughly frightened.

"I don't know," said Raymond, in answer to his question. "That depends. If you do as I say, I'll let you off easy, but if you don't—" and he tightened his grip upon Tom's throat in a very significant manner.

"I'll do just what you say," whimpered the rum-seller's son.

"Very well, then climb out of that overcoat."

The order was tremblingly obeyed.

"Now throw off that hat."

The broad-brimmed, soft felt hat which Tom wore was thrown upon the coat, the thoroughly terrified

fellow appearing only too glad to escape punishment at such a price.

"Now lie face down on that blanket," commanded Raymond.

"You don't intend to tie me, do you?" faltered Tom, in amazement, as the bold plan of escape which Raymond had in mind flashed upon him.

"That's about the size of it," coolly answered Raymond.

Tom made no response to this, and Raymond quickly bound him hand and foot.

"Now I'll have to trouble you for those shoes," he announced.

"My shoes?" ejaculated Tom, incredulously.

"That's what," declared Raymond, briefly, as he proceeded to remove Tom's shoes. "A trifle large—but they'll answer," he commented, as he laced them up on his own feet.

"You see, my valet, Mr. Wallace, is drying some of my things," he explained to his bewildered captive. "It leaves me a trifle shy on foot-gear."

"Now I have just one thing to say to you," he added, as he pulled Tom's soft felt hat close over his ears, and drew on his long gray ulster, "and it would be well for you to bear it in mind. A great change has occurred recently. You have become Raymond Benson, and I am Tom Atkins. It's a very remarkable transformation, and, of course, makes me feel meaner than mud. It may be hard for you to grasp this fact,

but it's so, just the same. Now you had better keep quiet. Father Atkins is considerably soured on you. He's a mean, sneaking, cowardly, vindictive sort of a low-bred scoundrel, and it would be just like him, if he heard you bellowing round down here, to lift up that flooring and give you a shot from his Winchester. Besides, I haven't forgotten the bounce I got from Squire Copeland's counter, and might take it into my head to come down here and give you a good thrashing myself. I probably sha'n't visit you for a few days, but if you should grow hungry in the meantime, you will, no doubt, find the smell of that hardtack over there very refreshing."

With these words, to which Tom listened with a sickly grin, Raymond took the lantern and ascended the ladder. He applied his shoulder to the flooring and found that he could raise it much more easily than he had anticipated. A moment later he found himself alone in the camp. The sunlight dazzled him. It seemed to him that he had spent a very long time in the scoop, and he was surprised, on looking at his watch, to find that it was only three o'clock.

On one of the bunks he found his cartridge-belt, just where old Pete had thrown it, but was unable to discover any trace of his revolver or knife. He glanced at the camp window as he buckled on the belt, with a half determination to make his escape through it. But this idea was speedily abandoned. The window was a single sash, securely nailed to its frame. The noise

occasioned by any attempt to remove it would be almost certain to result in discovery. Raymond decided that his best course would be to depend on the disguise he had secured from Tom to conceal his identity. He accordingly put on a bold front and walked from the camp, imitating, as closely as possible, Tom's peculiar, loping gait.

To his intense relief he found Ike Wallace the only person in the vicinity of the camp. The old man was busily engaged in shaving shingles, and merely gave him a glance over his shoulder, never once doubting that it was Tom. With eager steps Raymond hastened to the horse hovel and, climbing to the loft, was overjoyed to find his double-barreled shot-gun just where he had left it. His haversack, however, which had gone through the floor with him in his fall from the loft, had disappeared. Peering through an open space between the logs he saw it lying by the camp door where it had evidently been thrown by the smuggler chief. He felt fortunate in the fact that Pete in his hasty search of the hovel had failed to discover the gun, which still remained in the loft. With this in his hand he felt all his courage and confidence return. "If old Pete and I come together again," he thought, "there'll not be so much difference between us as there was before."

CHAPTER XXVII

AN UNEXPECTED TURN OF EVENTS

As Raymond was about to steal out of the door and around the end of the hovel to the path that led across the brook, he was arrested by the sound of voices. Carefully digging out some of the chinking in front of the horse stall, he saw Ike Wallace engaged in conversation with a young man about twenty-five years of age, a dark-skinned fellow whom Raymond remembered to have seen about the Corner on several occasions. "That's the young Frenchman whom the Corner boys saw helping old Ike with his shingles," he thought. "I wonder what he's up to."

It was evident that Ike was glad to see the young man, for he greeted him most heartily. "How d' ye do, Paul," he said, cordially. "I was jest beginnin' t' git a little narvous 'bout ye. I was almost afeard the Custom House officers had ketched ye."

"Oh, no. Not moche. Dey no can ronne so fas' lak me," was the laughing rejoinder. "Ba gosh, I t'ink dey come here, I lef' dis contree an' gone back plaintee fas' to Canadaw."

"Well, speed is a great thing in the business nowadays," assented Ike. "If ye go back to Canada,

I reckon es how I'll go 'long with ye. The good old times when the smugglers an' the Custom House deputies hobnobbed an' drank punch together hev gone. I remember Lafe Hamm, who used t' drive team for Steve Larkin when the old fellow ran the Bell Tavern at Bolton. There was a sight o' rum sold there in them days. It was a good time when everybody smiled occasionally—an' some on 'em a good deal oftener. There was barrels o' liquids sold over old man Larkin's bar. Nearly all on it come from across the line, an' mighty little on it ever paid tribute t' Uncle Sam.

"One starry winter night—so light ye could almost see t' read—Lafe was a-comin' home from across the line with a double horse sled loaded with barrels o' rum. Jest afore he got t' the tavern he happened t' look over his shoulder, an' who should he spy a-sittin' on the back part o' the load but the Collector o' Customs himself. The old fellow had been waitin' in the doorway of his office when Lafe passed, an' got on behind 'thout bein' noticed. Lafe never let on es how he'd seen him, but driv straight on t' the Bell Tavern. He pulled up under the old man's window and yelled at the top o' his voice, 'Here ye are, Steve. Here's your rum, Custom House officer an' all.'"

"Ba cripe! I gass it mak' heem jomp?"

"Wal, I should reckon es how it did. He never let on, though. He dressed as coolly as he ever did, but you may bet he kept up a consider'ble thinkin'. When

he got down into the yard, he met the Custom House officer jest es bland es a herrin'. 'Why, good-evenin', Mr. Bennett, how d' ye do,' ses he. 'Glad t' see ye. Drive thet rum into the barn, Lafe. We was a little late with this load, but I was goin' t' bring in the schedule on it fust thing in the mornin'. Come into the house an' git warm.' "

"Mabbe he go, hey?"

"Yes, an' got pretty well filled up afore he left, I guess. The next day Steve paid the duty on the rum an' nothin' was said 'bout it."

"He ban a sleek one," was the Frenchman's admiring comment.

"Oh! there used t' be some mighty lively chaps t' work a-totin' things across the line, unbeknown t' the officers, in them times," continued Ike. "I tell ye they had men o' brains t' steer such matters then—a mighty sight different from some on 'em thet lead off nowadays," he added, in a lower tone, casting a cautious glance about the clearing. "There wasn't nigh so much risk in them days. Roads were not so plenty nor so good 's they be now; people were fewer, an' the officers couldn't watch things so sharply. I wish you could ha' seen the crowd thet used t' make their headquarters t' the Bell Tavern 'n the old days. Smugglin' flourished then. Ye see thet was afore our pesky liquor laws was made, an' it was pretty hard t' tell jest whether any particular lot o' rum was sneaked across the line or not. Everybody thet did any tradin' sold it then.

Bless ye, how times hev changed! Why, in them days, a man could be jest es respectable sellin' rum es sellin' groceries. Nothin' was thought on it—an' as a matter o' fact the both on 'em were usually sold together. A man would hev been in pesky hard sleddin' then if he'd tried t' run a grocery store 'thout a good supply o' New England rum. There was lots o' money in thet part o' the business."

Ike paused, and puffed reflectively at his T. D. pipe.

"Why, Lord bless ye," he resumed, presently, "there's lots o' folks I know on to-day stickin' their noses 'n the air an' playin' the nabob, whose daddies, to my sartin knowledge, made their money sellin' rum 'n old times. I tell ye, Paul, it doesn't take a very heavy foundation for a codfish aristocracy. It mostly consists 'n elevation o' nose. Why, dear boy, if I'd a hung on t' my money in the old days, an' laid it up t' int'rest, I might to-day be cuttin' quite a wide swath with some o' the loftiest on 'em. Generosity was my great failin', but 't was enough t' shet me clean out o' thet crowd—an' here I am. But, arter all, the old days was the live ones, an' I like t' call 'em up now an' then."

"Ba tonnerre! I gass dat ban preetee high tam," commented Paul, with animation.

"Wal, ye may jest believe they were. Talk 'bout intemperance, bless ye, we don't know the rale meanin' o' thet word in these 'ere days o' prohibition. I wish ye could ha' seen the blowouts there used t' be in the

Bell Tavern. 'Most everybody thet was there took a hand in 'em, an' the amount o' rum thet would slide over the bar on them occasions was jest suthin' tremenjuss."

"Dat officers, where she ban?"

"Usually they was the fust ones t' git filled up an' laid away. They had a different way o' puttin' down rum in them days nor what they do now. Talk 'bout there bein' so much rum drank now as there ever was. It's all bosh. There don't begin t' be. People is a growin' more and more temp'rate. There's nowhere nigh so much rum smuggled across the line 's there used t' be when I fust started in the bis'ness with old Steve Larkin thutty years ago this fall."

"Mus' ban mos' all de tam wan grande soiree, I t'ink me," declared Paul.

"Thet's jest what it was," assented Ike. "A jollier crowd never got together. They was all the time a cuttin' up all sorts o' shines an' capers. Ye see there wasn't much danger in the work in them days. We wasn't all the time in mortal fear o' gettin' juggled. Bill Akers was the biggest joker in the crew. He's out West somewhere now, I believe. I kin see 'im now in my mind jest like he looked when he fust jined us. He was a tall, larrupin', loose-j'inted, good-natered feller, 's plumb full o' mischief as an' egg is o' meat, allus a-grinnin', an' allus hatchin' up some deviltry or other. Still, I'll say t' Bill's credit he allus took things in good part when he got rubbed now an' then hisself; but ye

can jest bet the feller thet fooled with 'im had t' look out. He most allus paid back his debts with int'rest, es some o' the boys found out t' their sorrow."

"He don't feel sateesfy I expec' till he play dem wan smart treek," laughed Paul.

"You bet he didn't," assented Ike. "The fust night he struck camp the boys sort o' sized 'im up for a mutthead. He'd no sooner got soundly t' sleep 'n Dan Ellis—one o' the wust jokers in camp—took a sharp knife an' cut out every blessed buttonhole on his clothes. Jeruselum! how the boys nagged 'im the next mornin'; I shall never forgit the quiet grin 't was on his mug as he sot straddle o' the deacon seat sewin' up the edges o' them buttonholes. Never said a word 'bout it, but you bet he kept up a powerful sight o' thinkin'.

"'Bout a week arter thet Dan was a-smokin' his pipe afore the fire one night, when all t' wunst she sailed away through the log chimney in the roof, an' was never seen arterwards."

"Ha! Ha! Dat tam it hees picnique," laughed Paul.

"Thet's what it was," chuckled Ike, "an' 't was only the beginnin' o' some o' the comicalist and most pestiverous tricks I ever hearn tell on. All on us got a taste on 'em—an' some on us got a square meal."

"Wedder you moche hongree or not, I t'ink me," suggested Paul.

"Didn't make a mite o' diff'rence," asserted Ike. "At fust we didn't know jest what t' make on it; but

it didn't take long t' s'picion thet Bill Akers was the father o' most all the deviltry afoot. His ingenuity an' industry was suthin' tremenjous; never seen the like on 't afore or since. We stood it jest es long 's we could an' then a crowd on us took 'im out front the camp one day, held 'im across a log there, an' gin 'im a good, sound spankin' with a big salt codfish."

"Sapre tonnerre!" interposed Paul. "I t'ink me he nearly tak' de fit."

"You bet we gin 'im fits," continued Ike. "He bellowed like a good un, an' promised better fashions—but, bless ye, he couldn't keep 'em. He jest couldn't keep from cuttin' up didoes nohow. I will say, howsomever, thet he was jest a little more keerful arter thet 'bout meddlin' with those on us who gin 'im the trouncin'. When he did do suthin' he laid out not t' git ketched."

"I gass dat codfeesh help heem for fin' out som't'eeng," suggested Paul.

"It was jest the medicine he needed," declared Ike. "Jest strengthened up his memory amazin'ly."

"Ba Joe! I bat he ban careful den how he laugh heemse'f on hees face," declared Paul.

"He hed no call t' laugh for quite a spell arter thet," declared Ike. "Still, for all his pranks Bill was a good feller an' I'd like mighty well t' see 'im agin. Times has changed in this 'ere bis'ness, Paul. There's mighty few on 'em makes a success on it now 'n the long run. I've had one or two tight squeaks myself, an' I don't

mind tellin' on ye thet I'm gittin' sick on 't. I reckon as how I'll cut loose, an' work into suthin' sort o' decent. We poor dogs is pretty sartin t' be the ones t' git pinched in the nippers o' the law. I tell ye, Paul, a man with money an' political influence kin do purty nigh es he wants t' in this world."

"I dunno, Ike," returned Paul, doubtfully. "Mabbe so. Jus' de sam' it not kip M'sieu Arno Damon from go to preeson for de smuggle. He got moche monee, an' ban beeg man on de politique up Mad'wascow. I don' t'ink me dat dem gouvernement fellaire care ver' moche 'bout dat."

"Wal, it's mighty often the case," persisted Ike, doggedly, a little staggered at Paul's practical way of meeting his gloomy view of official honesty. "Least-wise I've known a good many cases on it in my time."

Paul rose from the cedar butt that had served for a seat and stretched himself with a yawn.

"Where ye goin'?" asked Ike, with manifest uneasiness.

"I t'ink I ban go me to de Cornerre. Pete he not do heemse'f not'eeng for nex' mont'. Bimeby p'haps he start heem wance agen. I gass somet'eeng mak' heem scare."

"You're right, Paul," assented Ike. "Pete is scared, an' the wust on it all is he's got good reason t' be. I reckon he's about t' the end o' his rope. If he don't clar out mighty soon he'll fetch up at a place where the gov'ment 'll pay his board for quite a spell."

"De gouvernement!" exclaimed Paul, in a tone of dismay. "W'at mak' you t'eenk dat?"

"We're discovered," responded Ike, despondently. "The jig's up, Paul."

"Deescovered!" echoed Paul, in a panicky tone. "Who keeekin' de row?"

"Andrew Benson's grandson, the young feller you hearn testify agin Jean at the trial—the same feller as shot Pete's dog."

"Yass," said Paul, "I know heem."

"Wal," continued Ike, "Pete an' I was a-talkin' over matters out here in front o' the camp a short spell ago, never dreamin' there was a soul nigh us, when all t' once that 'ere Benson boy come tumblin' out of the loft in the hoss hovel down into the big double stall. I tell ye it gin us 'n awful start. The bugger 'd bin a-list'nin' up there an' hearn every blessed word we said."

Paul's face betrayed very plainly the alarm he felt at this announcement, and which he hastened to express in words.

"Ba cripe! He leessen? I gass den he hear heem som't'eengs. Wat Pete he do?"

"He ran in t' the hovel an' fetched him out here," said Ike. "I started t' tie him up with shingle rope, but afore I got it done he slid outer his coat 's if he'd bin greased, an' the way he streaked it across the clearin' was a caution t' owls. I tell ye it gin Pete 'n awful jolt. If the boy 'd a got safe across the brook I don't

believe Pete ud ever ketched 'im, for all he prides hisself on bein' sech a wonderful critter in the woods."

"Sapristi! Dat mus' mak' Pete mos' crazee. He get heem, hey?"

"Yes, he managed t' shake 'im off the log thet run across the brook, an' ketched 'im in the bed o' the stream."

"I was say me he ban mad," suggested Paul.

"As a wet hen," coincided Ike. "He was goin' t' gin 'im a lickin', but I 'lowed that wouldn't do nohow."

"Mon Dieu! I t'ink me not," said Paul, with emphasis. "W'at he do wit' heem?"

"The boy?"

"Yass."

"Oh, he's down in the scoop."

This announcement seemed to have an electrical effect upon Paul. He straightened himself with sudden decision, and cast an apprehensive glance about the clearing.

"Dat bad biz'neese," he said. "We go on spout. I t'ink she bus' rat off."

"Oh, I reckon not," said Ike, reassuringly. "They probably won't think o' lookin' for the boy for a week or so."

"I dunno," returned Paul, doubtfully. "I don't feel sateesfy dat ban so. Pete he ack jes' sam' he don' care for not'eeng in dis affaire. Mabbee he taken too moche on de w'isky."

"No," said Ike. "He was sober 's a judge. I hope ye won't ever let on thet I told ye 'bout this, Paul," he added, solicitously.

"I t'ink I will close ma tongue. I say not'eeng at all," assured Paul. "Wal, I gass I ban leffin' now. Bonjour, Ike, mon vieux, I t'ink I not go Cornerre, I gass I ronne me fas' I can for Canadaw."

"I'm good mind t' go along with ye, Paul," said Ike, wistfully. "Mebbe I will a little later. Mind your failin's, Paul."

"For w'at you spik lak dat, Ike?" asked the Frenchman, reproachfully. "I tole you I go me no more for jamboree. Las' tam I feel I was go crazee. Ma head roun', roun' she go. Ma wife he cry lak de bebe. It mak' me feel so bad I swear off ver' fas'."

"So ye have a wife, have ye, Paul?" asked Ike, with interest.

"I have de mos' nice leetle familee on whole paroisse on my cabane, four boy an' four girl—she mak' eight. Ma shaintee on St. Marie ban no belle maison; but she ver' warm, an' ma famme he kip heem so nice an' clean."

"Do you have a farm?" inquired Ike.

"No. I ban me wan poor farmerre. I work me dere in de sawmeel. I saw de slab. I got monee on ma clothes now, I go home for de good. I stay wit' my familee. I got me more monee in Les Etats Unis; but monee not ban all. Mabbe a man get heem all de monee in de worl'. W'at den? Some day, ba gosh, he die."

"True enough, Paul," assented Ike. "There's no pocket in a shroud. Say, do you s'pose ye could git me a job in thet 'ere sawmill?"

"I t'ink so."

"All right, keep 'n eye out for me, Paul. I may jine ye sooner 'n ye expect."

"I t'ink I feex dat," said Paul. "Wal, encore bonjour," and with a glance about the clearing Paul made his way with quick, catlike steps along the wood road back of the camp which stretched away towards the Canada line.

After he had gone, Ike buried his chin in his hands and remained for sometime in a deep study. It was evident that his reflections were of a perturbed character. Occasionally he would raise his head and glance suspiciously around the clearing, as if fearful of being watched. Once he arose and started to enter the camp, with some evident purpose in mind, then pausing a moment, irresolutely, he resumed his seat and former attitude.

Raymond, who had been an interested listener to the conversation between Ike and Paul, was in doubt as to what course of action he had best pursue. For a moment he entertained the thought of coming boldly forth and taking Ike prisoner under cover of his shotgun. But upon reflection he abandoned the thought. He would run great risks in securing the wiry old fellow, and besides, Pete was liable to return at any moment.

Having reached this conclusion, Raymond started to climb out of a little window behind the stalls at the rear of the hovel, but immediately drew back in consternation at the sight that met his gaze. Striding savagely up the narrow path that led from the brook was old Pete Atkins, roughly dragging behind him Ned Grover, securely bound with shingle rope.

CHAPTER XXVIII

NED HAS SOME STIRRING EXPERIENCES

After separating from Raymond, Ned Grover had struck boldly out into the timber, determined to make as wide a detour as possible before the time appointed for his meeting with Raymond in the clump of firs back of Dole's camp.

He was an adept in woodcraft, and succeeded in making rapid progress through the trees and underbrush. "I'll go out till I strike the brook and follow it down to the clearing," he thought. "If old Pete and his crowd have any special hiding-place, it won't be far from a water supply." With this reflection he continued rapidly on his way, and soon had the satisfaction of hearing the lively babble of the brook, as it ran briskly over its rocky bed on its long journey to the sea.

"Who'd ever have supposed," mused Ned, as he pushed his way through the bushes and stood for a moment upon a large boulder that jutted out from its bank, "that heavy logs could ever have been driven on such a small stream; yet I suppose there are thousands and thousands of feet go down here every spring. The system of sluicing has been a big thing for the lumber interests."

The method of timber driving which Ned had in mind is one adopted by lumbermen for getting logs down the brooks to streams and rivers, where the natural depth of the water is sufficient to float them.

The timber along such waterways was very early cut off and floated to the mills. Then the lumbermen were forced to go further back into the woods, occasioning longer hauls and a consequent increase of expense in getting the logs to the "landings," as the places where they are piled through the winter, preparatory to driving in the spring, are called.

When these hauls became so long as to be unprofitable, the lumbermen were forced to resort to new methods for getting the logs to the large waterways. Then it was that brooks which had always been thought too small for such purposes were utilized as waterways. The rocks and rubbish that impeded their beds were carefully removed. Large log dams were built at convenient intervals along their banks, and through sluiceways in these the logs were carried in the deep water thus created to the large streams or rivers with sufficient natural depth of water for driving.

Vast tracks of timber lands, once considered inaccessible to operators, were thus opened up for cutting, and the wealth and prosperity of the state materially increased.

Below the place where Ned had struck the brook was one of these log dams. It was admirably situated, between two steep banks of granite, on the brow of a

small waterfall that marked an abrupt descent of a dozen or more feet in the brook bed. The water ran swiftly through the sluiceway, the gate of which, as is customary with such dams, was always open except during the spring drives.

As a result, its artificial lake bed was empty the greater part of the year, but its waters, bounding over the edge of the falls, plunged into a deep natural basin which went by the name of the Pool, and was known to all sportsmen of that section as one of the finest places for trout fishing on the brook.

Ned pushed eagerly on to this place, intending to cut a pole, and try the effect of a fly-hook upon its speckled beauties. As he approached the edge of the dam, however, he heard the sound of angry voices from below. Crawling carefully to its top, he looked down and saw a sight that filled him with amazement. Standing beneath the slanting logs of the dam, a short distance from the Pool, was Simon Dart, endeavoring in his peculiarly soft-spoken and whining way, to pacify the anger of a brawny-looking man who walked excitedly up and down, talking and gesticulating in a very loud and emphatic manner.

The face of the man was what riveted Ned's attention. He could have sworn that it was Jean Gambier, though the last he had heard of that worthy was the information, conveyed in a brief paragraph in one of the Bolton papers, that he had arrived safely, in charge of the officers, at the State Prison at Thomaston, and had been

assigned work in the carriage department. The man who stood before Dart, however, was his exact counterpart. He had the same swarthy complexion, the same deep, shaggy eyebrows, and snapping, small, black eyes, and his head was covered with the same profusion of half curly, black hair.

"Well, I declare," thought Ned. "If that isn't Jean Gambier, it's his ghost. I had a chance to see him during the arson trial, and I can't possibly be deceived in that face." The man's words, however, speedily dispelled this idea. "I tole you," he said, fiercely, "dere ban a honder dollarre an' hees familee dey mus' have heem. Dere ban hees famme and de five leetle boy an' girl, an' I tole you dey mus' have de monee."

"Now, my good man, don't get excited," said Dart, blandly. "I want you to understand distinctly that I don't owe your brother a red cent. I never employed him. He worked for Atkins. If there was anything due him Pete is the man to pay it, not I."

"Jus' you look me here, M'sieu Dart, w'at for you spik lak dat? Ha! Ha! Monjee! I gass you t'ink me wan leetle spreng cheeken, hey?"

"Why, of course I don't think anything of the kind," declared Simon, impatiently.

"Excuse to me, M'sieu Dart. Don' geeve me some warm air, 'cos I don' lak me dat. I t'ink I rader have me pork an' bean mos' any tam. W'y don' you t'ink I know me who mos' begges man in dis whole biz-neese?"

You mak' de plan, an' get mos' de monee. I gass you pay me w'at belongs ma broder or ba gosh I mak' you t'ink I wan grande loup garou. I get me dem dollarre out you pocquette, or mabbee out you skeen."

"See here, my good friend," protested Simon, in alarm, "what's the use of getting so warm? Go slow, man. Go slow. I wouldn't cheat your brother's family out of a penny that properly belongs to them; but I don't feel called upon to pay other people's bills. I want to do the right thing by you; and was on my way to the camp when you met me. Suppose you come along with me and see Pete. We three can talk the thing over and fix it up right. I haven't any doubt but that if Pete is owing your brother what you say he is, he will pay it at once."

The Frenchman laughed, incredulously.

"I gass you mus' t'ink I ban crazee," he said. "Wat plaiseer it geeve for you! Mon Dieu! You so grande, so noble, so beeg on heart, ev'rywan mus' trus' you. How could soche a bonhomme cheat heem a poor Canayen? I t'ink I see Pete an' de res' hees gang keel dem dat fatted calf for me. Or mabbe dey tie me up in hoss shaintee. Excuzay me, M'sieu Dart. I don' ban so green I look me."

"Your suspicions are groundless and foolish," said Simon, stiffly. "I have no wish to deceive you. Now, even admitting that I do owe Jean Gambier a hundred dollars, what authority have I to pay it to you? How do I know you are his brother?"

"W'y I tole dat ban so, I—" began the Frenchman, in a tone of surprise.

"Yes, yes, I know what you say," interrupted Simon, impatiently; "but your saying so doesn't make it so. How do I know but what you're an imposter—a—a swindler?"

"A sweendler! Ba gorry. W'at's de matter wit youse'f?"

"Have you a written order for Jean Gambier's pay?" demanded Simon, coldly, ignoring the other's sarcasm.

"I tole you I ban me hees broder," persisted the Frenchman, doggedly. "I mus' have de monee for hees familee."

Simon held up both hands in despair.

"Oh, you don't understand!" he exclaimed. "How do I know Jean Gambier's family would get any money I paid you? No one has any right to pay over money on his account to a third person, without a written order from him."

"How ver', ver' moche you love you de law jus' dees tam!" sneered the Frenchman. "You mak' me for be seek. You wan beeg hypocreet. Ba cripe!" he added, in a sudden fierce gust of anger. "You jus' geeve for me dat monee, or I leek you 'bout one leetle inch you life, me."

The speaker was gesticulating violently, and his face was livid with passion.

Simon was thoroughly frightened. With a quick movement his hand sought his breast, but before he

could carry out his evident intention of drawing a revolver, he found himself looking into the muzzle of a heavy Colt which his companion had carried in his belt.

"For heaven's sake, don't shoot!" he cried. "I was just after my pocketbook."

"Yass, I expec' dat ban so," was the sarcastic rejoinder. "Now, M'sieu Dart, you jus' leef you hands over you face."

"You—you don't intend to rob me, do you?" faltered Simon, in genuine alarm.

"Oh no," returned the Frenchman, grimly. "I jus' mak me sure you don't rob my broder hees familiee. I gass I tak' me you monee an' you peestol."

"I'm in your power," acquiesced Simon, sullenly.

The Frenchman was about to carry out his purpose, when both he and Dart were startled by the sounds of a furious struggle, and loud, angry words, which came to them from above the dam.

So absorbed had Ned been in the interview between Dart and his companion that for a time he had forgotten everything else. He was rudely awakened from his interest in the scene below him by the grip of a heavy hand on his coat-collar, and a rough voice exclaiming:

"Ba golly! W'at you ban do here, you leetle rascal?"

Quickly turning his head Ned found himself in the tight grasp of a man so closely resembling the one he had seen talking with Dart that it almost seemed as if he were his shadow.

"It's a brother, perhaps a twin," was the thought that flashed across his mind. "Le' go o' me. What you think you're doing?" he added, aloud, to his captor, in tones of indignation.

"I t'ink me I keep yo ma leetle garcon mabbe not ver' long tam," returned his captor with provoking composure.

"Perhaps you will, and perhaps you'll not," returned Ned, angrily.

It was evident that he was far from being conquered. He was compactly built, and wonderfully strong and cordy for a boy of his years. With a sharp jerk he attempted to free himself from the strong grasp upon his collar. Failing in this, he suddenly seized his captor by the hair with both hands, and gave him a pull that threw him off his feet. The man still kept his hold on Ned's collar, and together they rolled over and over down the sharp incline of the dam to the basin beneath.

Fortunately they brought up near the end of the dam, otherwise they might have sustained serious injuries. As it was, they escaped with a few bruises, but both were thoroughly roused. The struggle was promptly renewed at the foot of the incline, but Ned was speedily overcome, and soon lay, panting and exhausted, upon the gravelly bed of the basin.

"Sapre!" ejaculated his captor, as he sat astride of him and securely bound him with a strong cord which he produced from his pocket. "You ban so queeck lak wan leetle weasel."

It was evident from the man's tone that his respect for Ned had been considerably increased by the stiff fight the boy had put up.

"What do you want of me? What have I done?" demanded Ned, breathing hard from the violence of his exertions.

"I see 'bout dat bamby," returned his captor, briefly, as he rose to his feet and lifted Ned after him. "Dat man down dere ma broder."

"Which—the smooth-faced one?" asked Ned, innocently.

"Mon Dieu! No," responded the Frenchman, disgustedly, "de oder wan."

"What were you intending to do—bury Dart after your brother had killed him?" asked Ned, sarcastically.

"Dat not ban so, ma leetle man," protested the Frenchman. "I ban go for I t'inks me ma broder ban dere, an' I gass he need heem me mabbe. I ronned down de brook an' fin' heem an' M'sieu Dart sam' tam I fin' you. M'sieu Dart owe ma broder moche monee. We mus' have heem for hees familiee."

"Well, you might as well smash Dart's head as to break his heart," declared Ned. "That's what will certainly happen if you get any money out of him."

"Wal, you ban a fonny wan," said Ned's captor, looking at him with evident interest. "W'at you ban lookin' for?"

"Well, I had thought of doing a little fishing."

"Dat so? Where you line heem be?"

"In my haversack."

"W'at for you keep heem dere if you wan' feesh?"

"I didn't want to use it till I got ready to."

"You ban fonny wan. You walk way down de brook, hey, to fin' some place to feesh, an' no fin' heem at all."

"I wasn't very anxious to fish," said Ned. "I didn't have much time for it, so I thought I would only try a few of the best holes, beginning with the big pool below the dam. I heard voices and thought some one had got in ahead of me, so I climbed up on the dam to see who they were. Just as I was looking down on them you came along and collared me. I should like to know what you mean by it. You've laid yourself liable to law by laying hands on me in this way. It's an outrage, and is pretty apt to make you a good deal of trouble."

"I t'ink I tak' me de chances," said Ned's captor, with a quiet grin.

"Who dat you got heem here?" shouted the other Gambier, who at this moment made his appearance through the underbrush, closely followed by Dart.

"Wan little garcon w'at I ketch me top de dam. He leessen w'at you two ban say."

"I know him," said Dart. "He's the son of one of my neighbors."

It was evident that Simon was thoroughly discomfited. His voice was strangely agitated, his mouth twitched nervously, and his sallow complexion had taken on an unusual pallor. Ned mentally concluded that

Simon had decided that a crisis was at hand, and was even then considering plans of escape—a conclusion that was shown, by subsequent events, to have been correct.

“How much did you say was due your brother?” he asked, sullenly, turning to the first brother.

“Wan honder dollarre.”

Drawing a wallet from his hip pocket, Dart dolefully counted out the amount and handed it to his inquisitor.

“This is not my debt, but I will pay it,” he said.

“We are now square, I believe.”

“Yass, dat ban all,” responded the Frenchman, with evident relief.

“You are quite sure that you don’t want me to pension your whole family, are you?”

“We only wan’ w’at ban our broder’s.”

“Well, you’ve got more than that this morning. I don’t object to giving something for charity now and then. Your brother’s family are evidently in straitened circumstances, and I don’t object to helping them a little; but you mustn’t try to ride a free horse to death.”

These remarks were evidently made for Ned’s ears, and, sorry as was the boy’s plight, he could hardly refrain from laughing outright at them.

Even the brothers appeared to see the humor of Simon Dart in the role of a philanthropist. Having secured his money they were impervious to his sarcasm, and grinned broadly at his peppery remarks.

“Dere ban noding further wit’ you,” said the elder brother, turning away from him impatiently.

"Well, then, I'll go on to the camp," continued Dart, as he struck out into the woods in the direction of the clearing; but Ned knew very well that it would be some time, if ever, before he would be seen again in that vicinity.

"Well, what do you want of me now, boys?" he said, turning to the Gambiers, when Simon had disappeared in the underbrush. "That money was paid you voluntarily, and I have been a witness of nothing that will count against you. The only way that I see in which you have laid yourselves liable is in your treatment of me, and I sha'n't say a word about it if you let me go."

"You tole us true?" asked the elder brother, anxiously.

"Upon my word."

"Wal, den, bonjour," he answered, as he released Ned from his bonds.

"Now let me give you a word of advice, boys," said Ned, when he found himself free. "Go to your home in Canada with that money and stay there. Don't come this way again. Something is going to drop round here pretty soon."

"Dat's jus' w'at we ban do," was the response, and in a moment more the brothers had disappeared through the woods.

When they were gone, Ned secured his gun and haversack from the place where he had left them when he climbed upon the dam. Then he glanced for the first

time at his watch. "My gracious!" he exclaimed to himself. "I didn't think it was so late. I was to meet Raymond behind the camp at two o'clock, and here it's already half past. It will be after three before I get there, in spite of all I can do."

Ned was right in this conclusion. Although he pushed forward with all possible haste, it was over an hour later than the appointed time of meeting when he reached the clump of firs behind the camp. He felt no surprise at not finding Raymond. He had expected that he would get tired of waiting. "I'll bet a dollar he's scouting round that camp somewhere," he thought. "I'll try that whistle on him," and, putting his fingers to his mouth, he gave the signal that had been agreed upon when he and Raymond separated. It was immediately answered by a brisk step in the underbrush. "I thought that would bring him," muttered Ned. "I wonder what mare's nest he's discovered now?"

The step drew nearer. The thick firs parted, and Ned turned to find himself in the rough grasp of old Pete Atkins.

CHAPTER XXIX

NED BECOMES ACQUAINTED WITH THE SCOOP

"This is sartinly great luck," chuckled the Chestnut rumseller exultingly, as his fingers closed on Ned's collar. "I felt dead sure thet first young cub wasn't alone."

"Hands off! What do you want of me?" cried Ned, indignantly.

"I want to see thet you're looked after an' taken good care on," was the sneering reply, as Pete proceeded to bind Ned in a very secure manner, despite his most frantic struggles, with some shingle rope which he took from one of his pockets.

"What you two boys think ye 'd do round here?" he asked, abruptly, when he had finished this task.

"Oh, hunt and fish."

"Wanted a little sport, did ye?"

"It makes no difference what I want. This piece of work will make you a mighty lot of trouble. What right have you to tie me up in this way?"

"All the right in the world, youngster. I'm first selectman o' this township. The state has neglected it; but I haven't. I've incorporated it and organized a town government. Now it seems t' us people here as how ye

need looking arter. You're a vagrant without visible means o' support, an' there are many things t' indicate that ye are loony," and Pete tapped his forehead with a significant grin.

The capture of Ned had apparently put the smuggler chief into a jocose frame of mind. He seemed to extract considerable amusement from his own efforts at wit.

"Do ye know where I'm a-taking of ye?" he asked, abruptly.

"No."

"T' the Letter K poorhouse. We'll keep ye there a spell till we decide what t' do with ye. It's evident that you're too dangerous a feller t' run at large. How many scalps did ye ever lift?"

"It makes no difference what I've done. You'll see the day you'll rue this business."

"Haven't ye any sense o' gratitude, ye young scamp? Come all the way down here for sport, an' now ye don't appreciate my efforts to gin it t' ye."

"Do you mean to rob me?" demanded Ned.

"Not at all, sonny. T' show ye thet I don't we'll leave your gun an' bundle o' dynamite right here in these firs. You can come back an' get 'em, if the Council o' State decides that you're all right."

"You'll find there isn't so much fun in this thing as you think."

"I guess not, sonny. Where's t' other feller?"

"Byer?"

"Yes."

"Oh, he didn't come with us in here. He just drove us down and took the team home."

A satisfied grin stole over Pete's face, and Ned was almost ready to cry with vexation. He saw that the wily old rascal had wormed out of him the very piece of information he was most anxious to secure. "Raymond," he reflected, "is probably a prisoner, and now that he's got me, and knows there are but two of us, he'll take precious good care that neither of us escapes."

"When youngsters like you try t' put me on my back, ye're liable t' find ye've bitten off considerably more than ye can chew," said old Pete, dropping his affected pleasantry as he took a firmer grip upon Ned's collar, and half lifted, half dragged him towards the camp. "I shouldn't wonder if ye wished ye'd stayed to home, where ye belong, afore ye get out o' this scrape."

"If this doesn't mean a good deal more trouble for you than it does for me, then I miss my guess, that's all," said Ned, defiantly.

"Crow away, my little bantam. We'll clip them wings o' yours so ye can't fly very far," responded Pete, wrathfully.

"Wal, who've ye got now?" demanded Ike Wallace, as Pete dragged Ned in front of the camp.

"The boy that came down here with young Benson," said Pete, with grim satisfaction. "Now we're all right, Ike. There was only two on 'em."

"Seems t' me we're all wrong," returned Ike, dole-

fully. "Ye don't s'pose the boys' folks will let 'em stay here very long 'thout hunting 'em up, do ye?"

"No, but it will be one thing t' hunt for 'em an' another t' find 'em," returned Pete, confidently. "Why, Ike, I'll bet there's ben hundreds o' people in thet camp since we built the scoop, an' nary a one outside o' the gang suspected its existence."

"Look here, Pete," said Ike, sharply, "if ye think you're goin' to keep them boys here an' not be found out when dozens o' men get t' ransacking this vicinity, an' even this camp, in sarch on 'em, ye show poorer jedgment than I want t' hitch to. Thet's all I've got t' say."

"Wal, in the fust place, they won't begin t' hunt for 'em for a week," declared Pete, doggedly.

"Why not?"

"Look at this knapsack. Boys don't lug so much grub for one day's fun. The young cubs are altogether too lazy for thet. No, them boys are out for a week, an' it will most likely be ten days afore their families begin t' be worried about 'em. Before thet the fellers 'll be here with the last load o' collateral. Then we can close up business an' get out for a spell."

"Ye think, then, that the jig is up, do ye?"

"O' course it is now; but only for a short time. In a few weeks matters 'll git quieted down agin. Folks 'll forgit about it, an' we can fix up some new place an' go on as before. All we've got t' do is t' hold tough for a day or two more. We must see thet the boys reach here all right with their stuff. It may be thet

we shall have to meet 'em an' have 'em dump it somewhere else. It seems t' me, though, thet if we can have a clear coast it 'll be a good deal better t' run it right through t' the scoop. Then we can watch our chances for getting it out t' the Corner."

"Ye couldn't leave it there a great spell with those boys on your hands," declared Ike.

"One thing is sartin, Ike, we must stand by our fellers an' see 'em safe through with the matter."

"O' course we must."

"If everything goes right we can close up operations an' clar out for a spell."

"What ye goin' t' do with these youngsters?"

"I don't know exactly yet. I haven't decided," responded Pete, evasively. "One thing is sartin, though, I sha'n't do anything thet will put us in a box. Depend on it, Ike, I will pull out o' this business all right. I've done a lot on it an' haven't ben trapped yet."

Ike brightened visibly at these words, and apparently began to feel that the outlook was not altogether so hopeless as he had imagined.

"Open up the scoop," commanded Pete; and the order was obeyed with considerable more alacrity than had been shown in Raymond's case.

"Now, my gay young lark, I've a fine little cage for ye here," said Pete, as he lifted Ned down the ladder. "It is snug an' tight, an' yer singing won't disturb the family 'n the least," and he chuckled loudly at his own wit.

"Is that you, father?" shouted Tom, as he caught the sound of his father's voice.

"Timenation! thet's Tom!" exclaimed Pete, in bewildered amazement.

"Wha—what in thunder does this mean?" he demanded, fiercely, as the light from Ike's lantern showed him his own son securely bound and laid out on the blankets where he had left Raymond. "How come ye here?"

"Raymond Benson did it. I couldn't help it," whimpered Tom, who had a terror of his father's anger.

"How did ye happen t' be here anyhow?"

"Ike sent me down with some hardtack and water for Benson. When I got here he jumped on me and tied me. Then he went off with my hat and overcoat."

"I thought ye had a hand in this," said Pete, turning angrily to Ike. "A pretty mess you've made o' things by your idiotic meddlin'. You was cut out, I reckon, for an old woman."

"Wal, I was goin' t' the Corner an' I didn't want the boy t' go 'thout any supper."

"Bah! Mighty considerate ye was for thet boy. Wal, if we don't ketch thet boy agin we're dished."

"Seems t' me your boy was the considerate one," growled Ike, who didn't relish Pete's sarcasm. "If he hadn't ben, he wouldn't a let a small boy like young Benson git the upper hands on 'im."

"How did thet happen?" demanded Pete, turning fiercely upon Tom.

"Well, you see," was the whining response, "I never had an idea but what he was tied, so I wasn't prepared for any tussle with him. I bent over him to give him a drink of water, when all of a sudden he grabbed me by the hair and laid me out flat. I wasn't expecting it, and before I could gather myself he had a grip on my throat that I couldn't shake off."

"How long's he ben gone?"

"About two hours, I should think."

"Nonsense," said Ike, impatiently. "It wasn't more 'n half an hour ago ye came down here."

"Well, it seemed two hours," persisted Tom.

"Ye don't appear t' know nothin' since young Benson put ye t' sleep," said Ike, tartly. "Where d' ye suppose thet young feller went to?" he asked, turning to Pete.

"I s'pose he's streaking it for home jest as fast as he can go," was the reply. "Here, cut thet boy loose." Ike reluctantly pulled out his knife and cut Tom's bonds. It was very evident that the young man was not a favorite of his.

"What ye goin' t' do?" he asked the father.

"I'm goin' t' have thet boy, an' I reckon ye'll help me ketch 'im."

"We can't do thet. He's quarter way t' the county road by this time."

"Thet makes no difference," responded Pete, energetically. "We'll have 'im if he is half way there. Even if he gits t' the county road ahead on us, 't won't

make no difference. He will still have full five miles t' go through the woods. My team is in the hovel jest above the branching off o' the tote road, an' we can easily overtake the boy with it, unless he should be gin a lift by some team, which isn't very likely at this time o' day. He'll be pretty well fagged by the time he gits out o' the woods. 'T won't take us long to ketch up with 'im. Mebbe we can overtake 'im afore he gits t' the county road. 'T any rate we'll make a pretty hard try for it."

"It would be an easy thing for 'im t' take t' the woods if he should see us overhaulin' 'im on the county road," suggested Ike, dubiously.

"Wal, I'd jest like t' see 'im git away from me if I git my eye on 'im agin. I reckon es how I can make 'bout es fast headway through the woods es he can."

"What if some team should meet us carryin' on 'im back?"

"Thet thing won't happen. The minute I git my grippers on thet boy, I'll take t' the woods with 'im."

"Thet'll be the right thing t' do," said Ike, approvingly.

"O' course 't will. I don't intend t' take any chances with thet boy if I git hold on him."

"Do you s'pose he's armed?"

"No, I secured his armory afore we put him into the scoop," declared Pete, in a tone of satisfaction.

"I see he's taken his cartridge-belt, but thet won't do 'im any good. T'other boy had the gun. It's in

the clump of firs now jest beyond the brook. I left it there with his pack when I collared 'im."

"I'm glad o' thet. If young Benson had a shootin'-iron in his hand, I for one shouldn't want t' be too free with 'im. You know by experience thet he wouldn't hesitate t' use it."

"The little devil. O' course I know it. He's ben the cause o' all this setback. I guess now ye begin t' wish ye hadn't ben so tender-hearted on his account. One thing sartin, if I git hold on 'im agin I'll gin 'im the soundest lickin' he ever got in his life."

"Don't do nothin' foolish," said Ike, nervously, and it was evident that he was not a little worried at the situation.

During this conversation the party had come up from the scoop, leaving Ned on the blankets below, and, while Ike was dropping the flooring into place, Pete seized the opportunity to address a few words of admonition to Tom.

"Look a here, numskull," he said, "I want ye t' keep out o' thet scoop. If ye should go down there thet youngster would be sartin t' change places with ye. Here, take this," he added, handing him the revolver he had secured from Raymond, "an' keep close watch o' things round here. If ye ever allow yourself t' get taken in again, by a boy smaller 'n you be, I'll try an' pound some pluck into ye. Understand thet, do ye?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wal, see thet ye keep it in mind. Come on, Ike."

Pete led the way up the tote road at a dog-trot, and the two men were soon out of sight.

"I'm a good mind to go down and let Ned go, anyway," muttered Tom, angrily, when he found himself alone. "I've no notion of being run over in this way. When they treat me like a dog, they'll not gain anything. It won't take them very long to discover that fact."

But the young fellow did not dare to put his revengeful thought into execution. He had a painful remembrance of the unmerciful whippings his father had given him, and was afraid to do anything that would so much provoke his anger. When he had satisfied himself that the two elder men had gone, he settled himself lazily back upon one of the bunks of the camp and was soon deeply absorbed in the exciting pages of a dime novel which he pulled from his pocket. This was a class of literature to which Tom was very partial, and it had exercised the same demoralizing influence upon him that it does upon every boy who is foolish enough to read it.

Meanwhile, Ned was alone with some harrowing reflections in the scoop. He had heard the flooring replaced above him with very much the same feelings that the sound had inspired in Raymond. "Well, this is a pretty fix," he muttered. "My gracious, I hope they won't catch Raymond. I think they'll be mistaken if they suppose he'll follow the tote road clear out to the county road. He's no fool. He has a little

pocket compass, and will have no trouble in quartering through the woods and striking the county road on the edge of the clearing. I don't believe they'd dare to trouble him there, for he would be too near houses. I suppose they took his gun and revolver away from him. If they didn't, I don't believe they could capture him, anyway. He isn't one of the kind to be taken as long as there is any fight left in him. If he only succeeds in reaching the Corner, the people there will come down here in force and clean this place out."

The air of the scoop was heavy and oppressive. Ned made an attempt to reach the rope that bound his arms, but old Ike had learned wisdom from experience, and had capped Pete's work by carefully tying his bandanna handkerchief about the cords before leaving the scoop. "It's no use," thought Ned, discouraged at this discovery. "They have done their work well. I'd give five dollars to know how Raymond got away."

The time dragged painfully. The cords seemed to tighten their hold upon him. His arms became stiff and cramped from remaining in one fixed and unnatural position. Ned felt that home was a good way off; that perhaps he and Raymond might never be heard from again. The thought made him shiver.

His reflections were interrupted by the sound of a bar inserted under the edge of the movable floor above.

"It's all day with us," he thought. "They've caught Raymond."

A moment later the flooring was thrown aside, and

Tom Atkins came slowly down the ladder, closely followed by Raymond Benson, bearing a lantern on his arm and holding a revolver in his hand, ready to shoot at the first sign of treachery on the part of his prisoner.

CHAPTER XXX

PETE ATKINS IN THE TOILS

When Raymond Benson, from his place of concealment in the horse hovel, saw his friend Ned Grover securely bound and in the clutches of old Pete Atkins, he was overcome with surprise. He was unable to imagine how he had been captured.

His first impulse was to seize his gun and go to his friend's assistance, but, fortunately, his more sober second thought restrained him. He saw that his chances of capturing both Ike and Pete would be small, and that unless he were able to do this any aggressive move on his part would be worse than folly. It would only result in making him Ned's companion in the scoop, and would cut off all hope of escape for both. He wisely decided, therefore, that, under the circumstances, discretion would prove the better part of valor. He could accomplish vastly more by strategy than he possibly could by force.

It occurred to him that when Ike and Pete discovered that he had escaped from the scoop they would be considerably disturbed, and would lose no time in searching for him. They would do this the more readily because they supposed him unarmed. He knew

very well that Pete wouldn't look for him on the foot-path across the brook. He had just come from that direction and would think, no doubt, that if Raymond had been in that vicinity he would have been with Ned, or at least have answered to his signal.

"They'll think I went home," he reflected, "and will look for me along the tote road. Perhaps it would be better for me to find a hiding-place in the thick woods to the left of the clearing. They'd scarcely think of looking for me there, and if they did, I could defend myself. I shall also be in a good position to watch the camp, and if those old fellows leave the clearing something will happen that will astonish them considerably when they get back. I'm in condition now to fight them on equal footing, if worst comes to worst."

With this determination Raymond waited until he felt sure that Pete and Ike had descended into the scoop with their prisoner. Then making a quick dash across the clearing to the place of concealment he had selected, he forced his way through a growth of scrub cedars that fringed it, and threw himself behind a large hemlock which had been blown down by the wind. "This will answer for a fort and hiding-place, too," he thought. "I believe I could hold my own here with half a dozen men like Pete Atkins."

At the foot of the hemlock, behind which Raymond had found such an excellent place of concealment, the large, gnarled roots had been half pulled from their bed of soggy earth. The moss and soil that still

adhered to them formed a massive web of natural lattice. Through it were several small openings which Raymond found, to his delight, commanded a good view of the whole clearing.

Scarcely had he taken his position at this post of observation, when Ike Wallace and old Pete Atkins emerged from the camp. It was evident from their actions that they were laboring under great excitement. Pete, after pausing a moment at the camp door to speak a few sharp words to some one within, started up the tote road at a dog-trot, with Ike rapidly following him. Both men were soon out of sight and hearing.

"They've left Tom to guard Ned," thought Raymond, exultingly. "I'll bet his father stopped and warned him not to get caught again. My! but mustn't he have felt cheap, though, when his father found him down in the scoop."

Raymond chuckled merrily at the thought of Tom's chagrin and discomfiture. When he felt sure that Pete and Ike were out of hearing, he left his hiding-place and stole softly across the clearing. Making his way to the rear of the camp, he crawled quietly upon the earth embankment and looked in through the window. The sight within showed him that his extra precaution had been needless. Curled comfortably up on the blankets of one of the bunks was Tom Atkins, completely absorbed in the exciting pages of the flashy novel he was reading. The fire in the center of the camp had burned low, but he was entirely oblivious of the fact.

"Nothing but a cannon-shot would rouse him," thought Raymond. "Well, one can't expect much else than weeds to grow in a mind seeded with that kind of literature. I suppose that shallow-pated fellow, who hasn't courage enough to face an intelligent sheep, thinks he's just cut out for an Indian killer and scalp lifter. Perhaps he imagines himself a bold pirate or a highway robber. Such fellows are usually the heroes of those cheap stories. I really believe, though, that one square look at a real wild Indian, or a single sniff of genuine gunpowder, would scare him into fits. It's a mighty easy thing to kill Indians and play the desperado on paper. It seems to me the publication of such rot ought to be prohibited by law."

With these reflections Raymond made his way to the door of the camp. Carefully lifting the latch, he swung the door open a little way and entered the camp, softly closing it again behind him. Then stepping quickly in front of Tom's bunk he pointed his gun at the young fellow's head and shouted, sternly:

"You are my prisoner! Surrender!"

With a wild start Tom dropped his book and gazed at Raymond like one awakened from a dream. Terror and amazement were depicted in every line of his face. Raymond's revolver lay on the bunk beside him, but he made no effort to reach for it.

"How—how—did—you come here?" he faltered.

"On my legs," coolly answered Raymond. "Climb out of that bunk," he added, peremptorily.

Tom lost no time in obeying this order.

"Now light that lantern," commanded Raymond, as he stepped to the bunk and took possession of the revolver.

"What for?" grumbled Tom.

"It makes no difference," was the stern response. "I advise you to do as I tell you and be quick about it."

Tom sullenly did as he was directed, at the same time starting toward the scoop.

"Hold on," said Raymond. "I guess I'll take charge of the glim," and taking the lantern from Tom's hand he hung it upon his own arm. He saw that the rum-seller's son was in a desperate mood, and concluded that it would be unwise to leave him any loophole for escape. At Raymond's command Tom threw off the flooring that covered the scoop and descended the ladder, Raymond following him closely with the lantern and revolver.

"Well, where in the world did you drop from?" exclaimed Ned, joyfully, as he recognized his friend. "I began to think that both of us would end our days in this hole. I tell you, old fellow, your face right here at this time is about the most cheerful sight I've ever seen. I was beginning to get terribly down at the mouth."

"I know all about it. I've been here myself."

"How did you get out?"

"Easy enough, with the assistance of my devoted and courageous friend here," said Raymond, lightly.

"Tom Atkins!" exclaimed Ned, grinning. "How long has he been your Man Friday?"

"He started in earlier in the day. He has served me most faithfully. In fact, his devotion has been something really touching."

"Even loaned you his clothes?" returned Ned, noticing Raymond's change of apparel, and entering into the spirit of the joke.

"He has that," said Raymond, "and built up my understanding with his shoes."

These pleasantries at his expense were evidently very galling to Tom, who furtively shot malevolent glances at his inquisitors, and gritted his teeth in impotent rage.

"It's all right now, Ned," continued Raymond, enthusiastically. "You and I are on top of the heap. We have the inside track. Here, take your knife and cut his ropes," he added to Tom.

The order was tremblingly obeyed.

"Now, Ned, just tie him up. Get down on the blanket," he added, addressing the rumseller's son.

"See here," whimpered Tom, "you're not going to leave me here again, are you?" It was evident that his former experience in the place had given him a wholesome horror of it.

"That's about the size of it," responded Raymond.

"Please don't do that," pleaded Tom. "I'll do anything you say if you won't put me down here. You don't want him to do it, do you?" he added, appealingly, to Ned.

"I've nothing to say about it," was the response. "But I don't see as it's any worse for you down here than it has been for me."

"Down with you," said Raymond, sharply. "We've no time to fool with you. I certainly don't owe you any favors after what has occurred. If matters go as I hope, however, I'll promise that you sha'n't have long to stay here."

With a very poor grace Tom submitted to the inevitable, and was soon securely bound and laid away under the blanket.

"Now what?" asked Ned, when he and Raymond stood in the camp, after carefully replacing the flooring over the scoop.

"The next thing is to get Pete."

"Don't we want Ike, too?"

"Yes, but I don't believe we shall have a chance to get him."

"Why not?"

"In my opinion the old fellow won't show up in this section again right away. This afternoon's proceedings have rattled him badly."

"Perhaps Pete won't come back."

"Don't have any fear of that. He will return for Tom, if for nothing more. I think myself, though, that the old fellow sees that he is nearly at the end of his rope."

"We don't want to run any risks with him," declared Ned.

"Of course not," assented Raymond.

"How shall we drop on him?" continued Ned. "He is as wiry as a cat, and won't give up, if he can help it, without a desperate fight."

"My idea is this. He will be sure to go to the scoop the very first thing when he comes back. You and I can watch for him through the window on the back of the camp, and drop on him about the time he is lifting that flooring."

"Don't you suppose he'll show fight?"

"He won't dare to if we cover him with the revolver and shot-gun."

"Perhaps he'll think that we wouldn't dare to shoot."

"No, he won't. After the experience he has had with me he will know better than that."

"That's so," admitted Ned. "He won't be likely, either, to forget the dose Gambier got right away."

"It isn't very likely that he will," said Raymond.

"But what if he should leave the tote road and follow the brook down to the camp?" asked Ned, nervously.

"That needn't trouble us," said Raymond, confidently. "Even if he did come that way, we should be able to hear him before he could see us, and get round on the side of the camp. We should be out of sight there."

"You're right, old fellow," admitted Ned. "Your head is longer than mine. Did you notice how Pete was armed?"

"Yes, he has his Winchester rifle and Ike had a shot-

gun. I think, too, that Pete must have had my clasp-knife."

"How shall we divide our armory?"

"You may take the shot-gun and I'll keep the revolver. If we get the drop on old Pete I will cover him and you may tie him."

"We couldn't possibly find a better place to watch them than this," said Ned, with enthusiasm, when he and Raymond had taken their positions behind the camp. "How did you find it?"

"I was here and got the lay of the land before I captured Tom."

The place was indeed most admirably adapted to the plans of the boys. That end of the camp, on account of its exposed position, had been given a broad embankment of earth that came almost up to the window. On this the boys were able to lie without fear of discovery by people entering the clearing along the tote road. They were thus able to secure at the same time, without fear of discovery, a fine view of the clearing and the interior of the camp.

"I'm afraid we shall be dished, Raymond," said Ned, when they had taken their positions.

"Why?"

"If old Pete goes clear out to the county road, it will be long after dark when he gets back."

"But he won't go to the county road."

"Why?"

"If he doesn't find any trace of me on the tote road

in the first mile or two, he will hurry back here to try to discover my trail before dark. Ike will probably push on to the county road, and you may be sure he will never show up here again, though he won't be fool enough to let Pete suspect it."

"I believe you're right, old fellow."

"I feel very sure that I am," was Raymond's confident rejoinder.

"It would be a bad thing for Ike if old Pete should run across him again after having been left in the lurch," continued Ned.

"You may rest assured that if Ike clears out, he will take precious good care that Pete never sees him again. He's shrewd enough for that."

"I guess that's so. The old fellow is brighter than he looks to be. Hark! What's that?"

The boys listened with bated breath. Down the tote road came the quick tread of a man. Peering cautiously around the corner of the camp, Raymond saw Pete Atkins come into the clearing at an even faster pace than he had left it. The old fellow was very evidently in a savage frame of mind, and there was an energy about his movements that told the boys he would be an ugly customer to handle. With long strides he made his way into the camp, where he stopped short in amazement and surprise. It was evident that he was terribly disconcerted at Tom's absence. He went to the door of the camp, took a careful look about the clearing, following it up with a visit to the horse hovel.

He returned, evidently satisfied that there was no one about the place.

"My soul! I shouldn't want to be in Tom's place if Pete should get his hands on him," whispered Ned.

"Sh-h," was Raymond's warning response. "He won't do it. Come on."

The boys saw that the time for action had arrived. Old Pete had leaned his gun in one corner of the camp, lighted the lantern and started for the iron bar which leaned against the door where Raymond had purposely left it. Taking this he inserted the point under the edge of the flooring above the scoop. Before he could lift it, however, he was startled by a sound behind him, and turning quickly, found himself covered by a revolver and shot-gun in the hands of Raymond Benson and Ned Grover.

CHAPTER XXXI

JOEL WEBBER IS GIVEN A SURPRISE

"Hands up, sir!" shouted Raymond, sternly, as the discomfited smuggler turned upon them. "You are our prisoner. If you attempt any funny business we'll drop you in your tracks."

There was something in the tone of this command that convinced Pete that it would be wise to obey it. He saw plainly that his captors were not to be trifled with.

"What d' ye want o' me?" he demanded, with an oath.

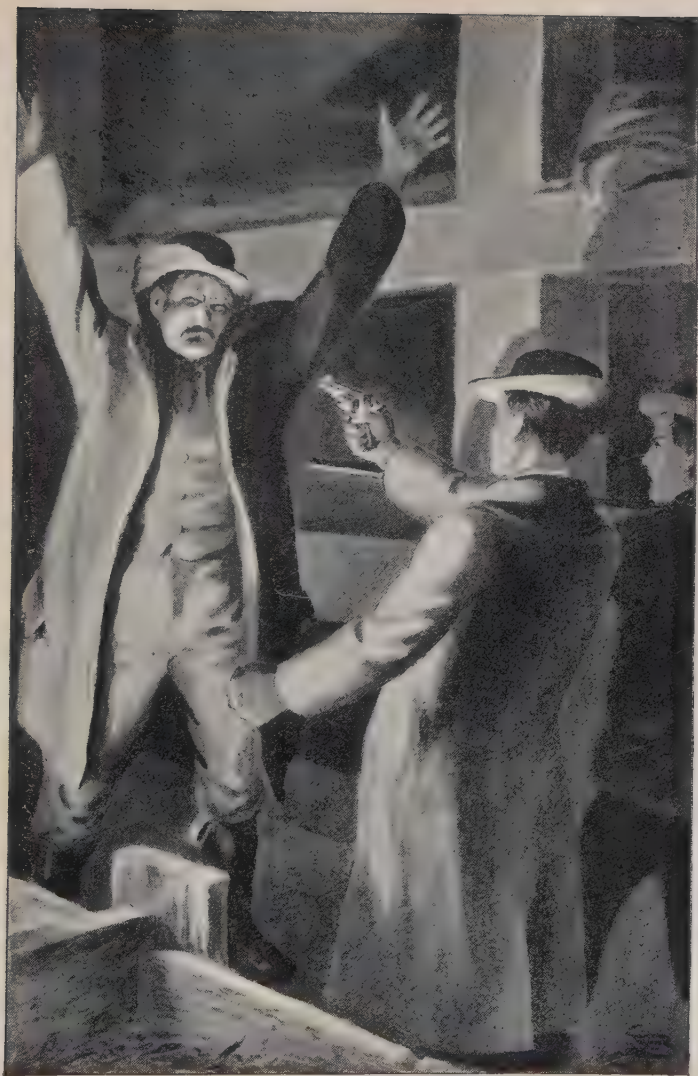
"You'll find out soon enough," said Ned, coolly.

"You have your innin's now. Mine 'll come later on," growled the smuggler chief, as he reluctantly complied with Raymond's order.

"Perhaps they may, but I've serious doubts of it. I think this game is played for you. Just run through his pockets, Ned, and see what you can find there."

Ned did as he was directed, but the only weapon he discovered was the clasp-knife which Pete had taken from Raymond.

"Now cross your hands behind you," commanded Raymond, when Ned had completed his search.



"HANDS UP, SIR!" SHOUTED RAYMOND, STERNLY.—Page 366.

"What for?"

"You'll find out in a minute."

"Wal, I won't do nothin' o' the kind."

"Either you'll put your hands behind you, and be quick about it, or I'll drop you in your tracks. After the experience I've had with you I'm in no mood for fooling," said Raymond, sharply.

"I was a fool not to hobble you when I had a chance," hissed the smuggler chief, his face white with passion.

"It wasn't your fault that you didn't," replied Raymond, grimly. "Come, you're wasting time. Get a move on you."

With a savage oath, Pete did as he was directed. His eyes were bloodshot, and his fiercely scowling, vindictive features showed very plainly his rage and chagrin. Nothing, but the firm conviction that such a course would mean instant death to him, prevented him from springing at the throats of his captors.

When Ned had carefully bound his arms with many coils of shingle rope, and crowned the work with Ike Wallace's bandanna handkerchief, the flooring was lifted and Raymond gave the order to march. Slowly and carefully Pete made his way down the short ladder, to the unspeakable astonishment and disappointment of Tom, who had never dreamed of seeing his father in such a plight. He had heard the flooring removed, in the full expectation that Pete had returned and was about to release him. He had never doubted for a

moment that Raymond and Ned had made for home with all possible speed upon leaving the scoop.

The situation was not without its recompense for Tom, however. He was even a greater coward physically than morally, and had felt, with fear and trembling, that his father would give him a terrible thrashing when he again found him in the same predicament as when Ned was brought into the scoop. With the boys he felt safe from corporal punishment, and in this thought he found a solace for his confinement. His father might not be very sociable, but he would be company, and that was considerable in the darkness of the scoop.

"Well, Tom," said Raymond, as he flashed the lantern into his face, "we've brought you a bedfellow."

"Yes," said Pete, savagely, "if it hadn't a ben for your snivelin' foolishness things might have gone t'other way."

"Hold on, Mr. Atkins," said Ned, "it won't help the situation in the least to abuse your son."

"I couldn't help it," whined Tom. "He took me by surprise."

"Yes, no doubt of it," said Pete, sarcastically. "Sleepy fellers like you are allus gittin' surprised."

"It seems to me that he isn't the only one in the family that has that failing," said Raymond, impatiently. "Climb down on that blanket, Mr. Atkins."

Pete sullenly took his place by the side of Tom, and

Ned soon saw that his legs were as securely bound as his arms.

"Now," said Raymond, as he surveyed his prisoners with evident satisfaction, "we shall be obliged to leave you here for a while. It's an uncomfortable position for you, I know, but I don't see how we can very well avoid it. We shall get you into other quarters at Bolton, though, before long."

With these words, Raymond and Ned returned up the ladder into the camp. When they had replaced the flooring above the scoop and replenished the fire which had nearly died out, they sat down upon the deacon seat before its cheerful blaze to plan how they should get their prisoners to the Corner. Now that they had them safely secured, they began to feel that Pete and his son were white elephants on their hands.

"I don't see but that we've got to stay here all night," said Ned. "It will be two days before Byer comes after us with the team, and it's altogether too much to think of making the Corner to-night without one. I'm certainly too tired to walk that far, even if we could have daylight for it."

"You're right, Ned," assented Raymond. "It's five o'clock now, and would be pitch-dark before we could cover half the ten miles to the county road. Then there would be eight miles more to the Corner. I agree with you. We had better stay right here and start at daybreak in the morning."

"But what if Ike Wallace or some of the gang should walk in on us?"

"I don't have much fear of that. There isn't any doubt in my mind but that Ike has cleared out. I don't believe he will be seen in these parts again for a long time, perhaps never."

"I don't think any of the gang will trouble us, either," said Ned, brightly, as a sudden thought came to him. "I heard Pete tell Ike Wallace when they were starting out to look for you, that we undoubtedly came prepared to stay a week, and that it would probably be ten days before our folks got worried enough about us to hunt for us. He said that before that time the boys would be back with the last load of collateral, and the business would be dropped for a while, until the storm blew over."

"Well, if that's the case, there probably won't be any of the gang about here for five or six days," said Raymond.

"There's another thing," said Ned. "Pete also spoke of having a team in the old log hovel on the county road near the place where the tote road branches off. I had nearly forgotten that."

"Well, you may make up your mind that it didn't slip Ike Wallace's memory," answered Raymond. "If Pete had a team there, you may feel very certain that Ike is well on his way to Canada with it by this time. You don't lose that old coon very easily."

"That's so. He knows how to take care of himself.

Let's go down in the firs and get my gun and haversack."

"Don't you suppose Pete has taken them?"

"No. He hasn't had time. He had all he wanted to do to take care of me, so he left my things where he found me. No doubt he intended to go after them later, but when he got into the scoop and found you were gone, he lost no time in getting after you. I don't doubt but that we shall find my things in the firs just as he left them."

"Well, we will go after them together. We must hurry about it, though. It won't do to leave the camp unguarded long."

The boys hurried across the brook and along the narrow path to the firs, where, sure enough, as Ned had predicted, the gun and haversack were found just where Pete had left them. Raymond and Ned bore them back to the camp in triumph.

"It looks to me as if our victory were about as complete as it possibly could be," said Ned, when they sat together again upon the deacon seat.

"I don't know what is lacking," responded Raymond.

The conversation of the boys was interrupted by the sound of a quick step in the clearing.

"I believe that's Ike Wallace," said Ned, reaching for his shot-gun.

"No, it isn't," said Raymond. "Old Ike hasn't stepped in that brisk, vigorous way for years."

"Perhaps it's one of the gang."

"Perhaps so, but we shall hardly be fools enough to sit here with a revolver and two guns ready to use and let one man take us prisoners. He won't be expecting to see us, and it will be an easy matter to get the drop on him."

"We don't want to be too hasty."

"No, we will have the advantage. The surprise will be on the other side."

The step drew nearer, the door was thrown open, and a big, broad-shouldered young man stepped into the camp. Raymond and Ned at once covered him with their weapons, but immediately lowered them in astonishment and chagrin, when, to their great joy, they recognized the round, good-natured face of Joel Webber.

"Put down your shooters, boys," said the big fellow, holding up both hands in mock alarm. "I surrender, and you may have every blessed thing in that pack I just brought across the line."

Raymond and Ned gave one long look to make sure that their eyes had not deceived them, and then, rushing forward, seized both of Joel's hands and gave them such a shaking as left no doubt of the cordiality of their welcome.

"How in the world did you come here?" they asked in chorus.

"Easy, easy, boys. Give me a little chance to catch my breath," laughed the big fellow, as he seated himself on the deacon seat and stretched out his hands to the

cheerful blaze of the fire. "I give myself up. Come and search me."

"Well, we'll take good care of you," said Ned, warmly.

"I should almost surmise from my reception that you were not expecting me. Didn't get my telegram, did you?"

"I believe you'd joke at a funeral, Joel," said Raymond.

"Well, that would depend a good deal on whose funeral it was. You boys, if I remember correctly, laughed pretty heartily at what came very near being mine," he added, with a good-natured grimace.

"You couldn't blame us for that, old fellow," said Ned. "You would have laughed yourself if you could have seen how you looked when that bear knocked you into the underbrush."

"Oh, I never blamed you, boys. I was only too glad to do something to amuse you. I'm a generous sort of a soul, anyway; always ready to make a martyr of myself upon the altar of hilarity. I went out into that second growth on my way down here and had a good laugh all to myself, just from thinking how comical that bear must have looked."

"That's an unselfish way of putting it," laughed Raymond. "But, old fellow, I'm glad to see you. In fact your coming just now seems almost providential."

"If you'd been old cloven foot himself, it wouldn't have astonished us a bit more," added Ned.

"Well, I guess we're not very far from the favorite roosting place o' one of his imps," responded Joel.

"I guess not, too," said Raymond. "But you haven't told us what brought you here."

"Well, I had an idea that you were turning some scheme in your mind when I saw you reading the reward notice in the post-office the other day. I went up to Bettycook lake fishing day before yesterday, and didn't get back till this morning. On my way back I met Byer Ames, who told me that he had driven you two young hoodlums down to Letter K. It didn't take me long to smell a good-sized rat. I hurried home and did some chores. Then I harnessed the old gray mare into the beach-wagon, and here I am. I kinder thought the way you fellows started out on me that you'd turned buccaneers. Looked for a minute as if I'd be mighty lucky to turn over my wallet and get away with my life. I've partially changed my mind about it, however. In fact, I almost believe that you are glad to see me."

"You know we are, you old rat," said Ned.

"Well, I see you haven't captured old Pete yet," continued Joel, glancing about the camp.

"That's where you're mistaken," said Raymond.

"Of course you have," said Joel, laughingly, "an' got him stowed away in that pack probably," he added, pointing at Ned's haversack.

"You think we're joking, do you?" demanded Raymond.

"No, indeed," said Joel, with mock solemnity.

"You two boys never joke any. Dud Rich'll swear to that."

"We are not joking this time. We have told you the truth," said Raymond, with an earnestness that left Joel no doubt of his sincerity.

The big fellow could scarcely credit his senses. His bantering tone left him abruptly.

"You don't say!" he ejaculated, in genuine amazement.

"That's a fact, Joel," said Ned, eagerly. "We've captured Pete Atkins and have him thoroughly bound and safely stowed away. What's more, we've evidence enough against him to convict him twice over."

"You're not joking, are you, boys?" persisted Joel, incredulously.

"Not a bit of it. We never were more serious in our lives," said Raymond.

"Well, I swan!" exclaimed the big fellow, in open-mouthed astonishment. "That just beats all creation. Where is he?"

Without a word Raymond arose, and taking the iron bar from the bunk lifted the flooring from its place.

"Well, I snum to gracious!" exclaimed Joel, as he peered down into the depths of the scoop. "What infernal lunkheads some of us must have been! Why, boys, it wasn't more than six weeks ago that Cobe Hersom and I were down here fishing and slept all night exactly over that hole. I vow, we ought to be kicked to death by grasshoppers."

"Not so bad as that, old fellow," responded Raymond. "It isn't at all surprising that so skilful an arrangement as that should have escaped detection. No one would think of looking here for anything."

"Well, perhaps not," admitted Joel, "but I can't help feeling a little cheap, all the same, to think that my nose was so near this thing and didn't succeed in smelling it out. Let's take a look at the inside of the pit."

The three accordingly descended the ladder. Joel's amazement was only deepened when he saw the nature of the hiding-place by which the brawny smuggler had been able so long to escape detection in his operations.

"The very boldness of the thing has been all that's saved it," he declared; then, lantern in hand, he walked along and took a good look at Pete and Tom. "Well, you're a pair of chromos," was his comment.

"Yes, ye can well afford t' insult a man when he can't defend himself," sneered Pete. "There are times when some people are mighty brave."

"Well, I never discovered anything very alarming about you," retorted Joel. "You've never been the one to fight man fashion. You'd a good deal rather sneak round in the night and burn a man's barn or stab his horse. Oh, you're a very brave fellow, you are. There's a government job waiting for you."

"Don't be too sure of that. You haven't got through with me yet."

"That's so, but I reckon we sha'n't keep you on our hands any longer 'n we have to. You're like a rotten

egg—the sooner rid of the better. Cut the ropes from their legs, boys.”

“What for?” asked Raymond, in surprise.

“Because we’re going to start for home.”

“But it will be dark in an hour,” objected Ned.

“Well, what of that? We have a lantern and it will be smooth sailing after we get to the county road. I reckon we ought to reach the Corner by nine o’clock. I’m willing to do just as you say, boys, but I believe that the sooner we get these fellows to the jail at Bolton, the better it’ll be.”

After a moment’s reflection, the boys decided that Joel was right. The ropes that bound the legs of Pete and Tom were cut, and they were taken up into the camp. Here they were both tied to a long rope, the end of which Joel wound about his waist, laughingly declaring that the prisoners would find him a fairly good anchor in case they should attempt to get away. Raymond and Ned with their guns on their shoulders headed the procession, the former carrying the lantern.

In spite of all their efforts to make good time the trip was a slow and tedious one, and it was eight o’clock when they finally reached the county road. After this, as Joel had predicted, their progress was easy. Pete and Tom Atkins were given a place on the wide, front seat, and Joel sat between them and drove. Raymond and Ned sat on the back seat with their guns in readiness to shoot should the prisoners make any attempt to escape. It was half past nine when the party pulled up

in front of Squire Copeland's store. The loafers had nearly all gone home, but the few who remained were treated to a sensation that furnished the theme of their conversation for many a day after.

Pete Atkins suddenly became invested with an extraordinary interest, and although his face had for years been a familiar one in Chestnut, he was gazed upon by the eager group of his fellow townsmen that crowded round the wagon very much as they would have viewed the royal Bengal tiger at a circus.

If he had any friends in the group they did not announce themselves. Every one seemed anxious that Pete should not by any possibility make his escape.

A number of men volunteered to stand guard over him and Tom that night at the Town Hall, and Joel, who had vowed never to sleep until he saw the doors of the Bolton jail close upon them, accepted the services of half a dozen of them, as he afterwards declared, more for company than anything else.

Squire Copeland insisted that Raymond and Ned should remain all night at his house, and the invitation was thankfully accepted. For a long time they lay awake and talked over their exciting adventures in Letter K, which had ended so triumphantly in the capture of the smuggler chief. It was past twelve o'clock when they finally fell asleep, the two happiest boys in Chestnut.

CHAPTER XXXII

CONCLUSION

Very little remains to be told. The news of Pete Atkins's capture spread like wild-fire through the town. Raymond and Ned were the heroes of the hour. Their praises were in everybody's mouth. Those who had been the most eager to condemn the former as a bad boy when he left the Free High School were now among the foremost in extolling him, and many who had thought Ned a "spoiled boy" discovered that they had always known that he had the "right stuff in him."

Among all the congratulations tendered Raymond there was none that affected him more deeply than Grandfather Benson's hearty "God bless you, my boy. You have done well."

The day following their capture Pete Atkins and his son were taken to Bolton and lodged in jail. Simon Dart's store was thoroughly searched, and the result showed that there was scarcely any kind of merchandise on which a profit could be made by evading the custom laws in which the crafty fellow had not dealt. The capacious cellar of his store had been extended far back into the hill, and was packed full of a general variety of smuggled goods. Prominent among its contents were

a number of barrels of various kinds of liquor. Here, it was evident, had been the place where Pete Atkins had long stored up the intoxicants that had been such a curse to the good town of Chestnut.

At the preliminary hearing of the rumseller and his son, Tom was sentenced to the Reform School during his minority, there being no proof that he was personally connected with the smuggling operations of his father. Pete, however, was handed over to the Federal authorities. He was taken to Portland and tried before the United States Court at that place. Raymond and Ned were summoned to the city as witnesses. They were not called upon to testify, however. Pete pleaded guilty to the charge of smuggling, and, although every effort was made by his counsel to secure a light sentence, he was given a long term of imprisonment. His family shortly after removed to another state, and the town of Chestnut was happily rid of them.

Simon Dart endeavored to make his way to California, but forgot that electricity travels faster than steam. He was arrested in Chicago, being recognized from a description sent out by the Associated Press. When he finally came up for trial before the Circuit Court at Portland, he was given the same sentence that had been meted out to Pete, and was sent to bear him company. Ike Wallace escaped safely into Canada, and was never heard from after. For more than a week a close watch was kept upon the Dole camp, but none of the Atkins gang appeared there. They had evidently

taken the alarm and left the county. The smuggling business was forever at an end in the good town of Chestnut.

Raymond and Ned had a very pleasant time in Portland, going where they pleased and amusing themselves as they thought best. Upon their return home, the reward of a hundred dollars which had been offered for the arrest and conviction of the smugglers was paid to them. They insisted on sharing it with Joel Webber, but he emphatically and resolutely refused to take a penny of it. He declared that all the credit for the capture of Pete, and the breaking up of his gang, belonged to the boys, and they alone should have the benefits that came from it.

The people of Chestnut, however, were not willing that Joel should go unrewarded for his share in the good work. A subscription paper was passed around, and the following Christmas he was presented with a fine fur overcoat, a recognition that deeply affected the big, good-hearted fellow.

It was about a week after the stirring events narrated in the foregoing chapters that Ned Grover came enthusiastically upon Raymond as he was cutting up sap troughs in front of his camp.

"You might as well give up that work, old fellow," he exclaimed. "You'll have no use for those."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Raymond, in surprise.

"I've some great news to tell you. Your grandfather

and my father have put their heads together, and have decided to let you and me go to Krampton Academy. That was the place, you know, where your cousin, Dave Weston, thought of going before he made up his mind to enter the Maine Medical School at Brunswick. Father has written the principal and has made arrangements to have us room in the large dormitory and take our meals at the Academy club. I have the catalogue of the institution at home, and there were two hundred and forty students there last term. Just think of that, old fellow."

Raymond had listened excitedly to this unexpected information, and at the close of Ned's remarks gave expression to his feelings in an enthusiastic cheer. It had long been his ambition to go away from home to school, and he was overjoyed at this promise for the fulfilment of his desires. He mentally resolved to give such a good account of himself that Grandfather Benson would never regret having sent him to Krampton.

That afternoon Raymond and Ned visited the birch ridge on Grandfather Benson's back lot with their shotguns, but their minds were more intent on plans for the future than upon hunting, and they returned home with only a few partridges.

That night there was a tremor in Grandfather Benson's voice as he conducted the family prayers, and Raymond thought he saw a tear glisten under his grandmother's spectacles when she kissed him good-night.

For the first time he realized what a sacrifice they had made for him, to take up their lonely life again that he might be given advantages to fit him better for the work of after years. He knew how much they would miss him, and how earnestly their prayers would go out after him. He almost reproached himself for consenting to leave them, and, when he finally fell asleep, it was with a better understanding than ever before of how near and dear to him were the good couple down-stairs.

In due season Raymond and Ned went away to school, but there is not space in these pages to tell you of their experiences at Krampton Academy. What befell them there will very properly form the subject-matter of a future volume, entitled "RAYMOND BENSON AT KRAMPTON, OR TWO LIVE BOYS AT PREPARATORY SCHOOL."



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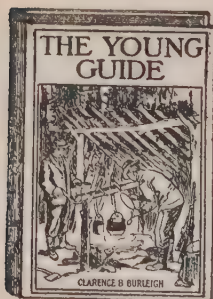
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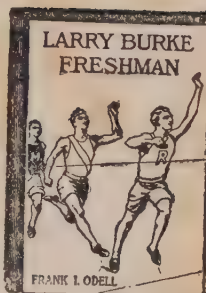
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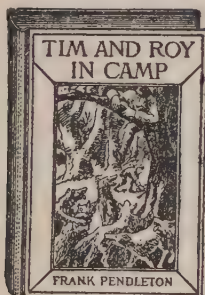
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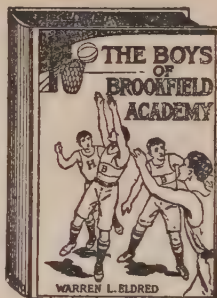
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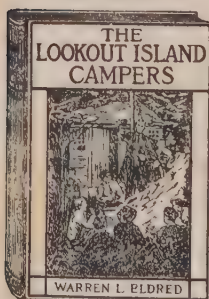
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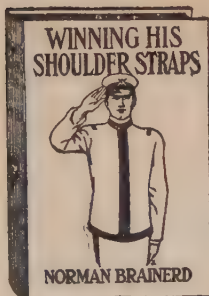
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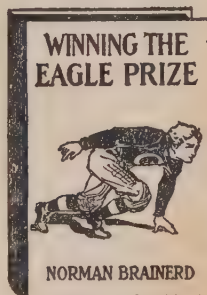
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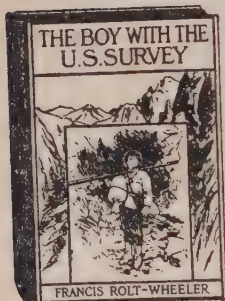
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